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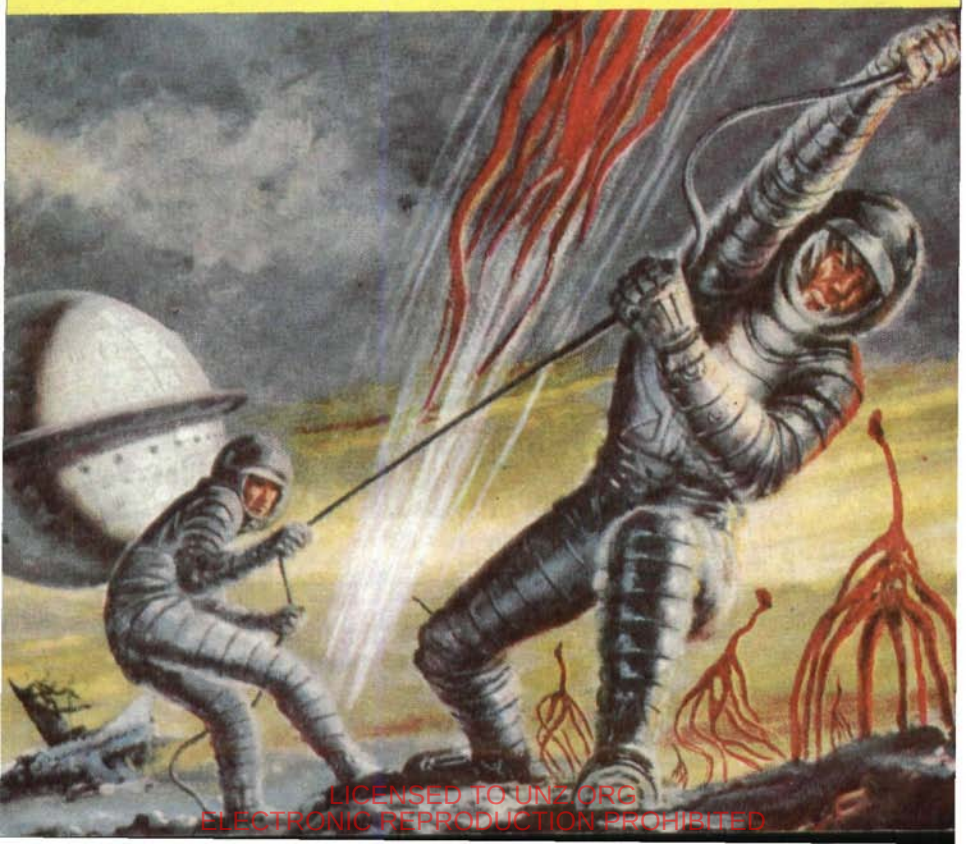

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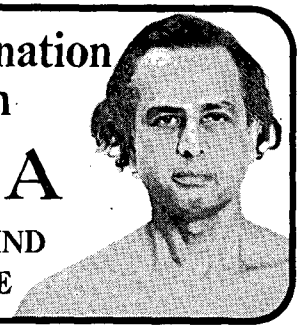

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# FANTASTIC

DECEMBER, 1968 Vol. 18, No. 2

MOND HAMILTON'S GREAT NEW STAR KINGS NOVEL,
E BROKEN STARS ..... 6

W SHORT STORIES
LL OF THE CENTURIES, HENRY SLESAR ..... 37
E PROPHECY, BILL PRONZINI ..... 124

ECIAL NOVELET
E DISENCHANTED, WALLACE WEST and JOHN HILLYARD .... 78

)MPLETE SHORT NOVEL
E MENTAL ASSASSINS, GREGG CONRAD ..... 40

)VELETS
E USURPERS, GEOFF ST. REYNARD ..... 96
E COLLECTORS, GORDON DEWEY ..... 126

ATURES
E MAGAZINES: THE WAY IT IS (Editorial), A.L. CARAMINE ..... 4
)1: A SPACE ODYSSEY, LAWRENCE JANIFER ..... 138
E RHYME OF THE SF ANCIENT AUTHOR, J.R. PIERCE ..... 139
NTASY BOOKS, FRITZ LEIBER ..... 141

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ITASTIC, Vol. 18, No. 2 DECEMBER, 1968 is published bi-monthly by **ULTIMATE PUB-**
**ling Co., Inc., 69-92 230 Street, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11364.** Editorial
ce: Box 7, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11354. Business Office: Purchase, N.Y.,
175, Portchester, N.Y. at 50c a copy. Subscription rates: One year (6 issues) United
tes and possessions: $2.50; Canada and Pan American Union countries: $3.00; all
er countries $3.50. Change of address notices, undeliverable copies, orders for sub-
iptions, and other mail items are to be sent to Box 7, Oakland Gardens, Flushing,
. 11364. Second Class Postage paid at Flushing, N.Y. and at additional mailing office.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# THE MAGAZINES; THE WAY IT IS

## Editorial by A. L. Caramine

The world of fiction is undergoing a strange and fascinating change. The publishing industry is growing by leaps and bounds, each year seeing new records established and broken, both in the number of books published, and the fantastic prices paid. Publishing is healthy, and book publishing is healthiest of all. With one exception: fiction. While the number of books published is increasing, the number of new novels published each year is actually declining.

This is a trend that began several years ago, and is continuing, without exception, although the rate of decline varies a bit from year to year. It seems certain that the day of the popular novel is drawing towards a rapid, and not too distant end.

But even here there is an exception: science fiction. Long the orphan of the publishing industry, shunned by most major houses, relegated to the dusty corners inhabited by the small budget specialty houses, science fiction is finally coming into its own.

Why this sudden resurgence of a field that ten years ago was considered at best moribund, and at worst, already dead? The magazines, from a high of nearly forty titles in the mid-fifties, in the space of three or four years shrank to a small handful, all of which were losing circulation, and worrying about their own future.

At the same time, however, scienc fiction in the form of paperbac novels was beginning a slow an steady growth, which continuec building strength, until now ther isn't a paperback publisher in th business who doesn't rely on a stron science fiction list as a most impo tant part of his offerings.

Magazine science fiction hit bo tom, stayed there awhile, and slow ly started growing again. Never be fore have the magazines offered s much inducement in the form c good story rates, trying to attrac the best authors. There is still a cer tain amount of fluctuation, shiftin of publishing schedules, the droppin of a weaker title to concentrate o a stronger one, but the overall ef fect has been one of increasin strength, until the magazines stil publishing are no longer afraid tha next month might see them, too disappearing in the wake of so man others.

And the magazines that disap peared were not all bad, although o course there are always weak mem bers of any group. A publishing dynasty came to an end with the death of *Startling Stories* in 1955 after sixteen years of growth from an unpretentious adventure book aimed at the reader just graduating from comic books into adult fiction. The story of *Startling Stories* is, in a very realy way, the story of science fiction's growing up. From an aus-

*(Continued on page 144)*



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# THE BROKEN STARS

## EDMOND HAMILTON

### Illustrated by DAN ADKINS

*Edmond Hamilton needs no introduction from the likes of me . . . or, for that matter, from the likes of any of us. He is the author of some of the best space opera ever written (the majority of the CAPTAIN FUTURE series in the old THRILLING WONDER) and some of the most sensitive, provocative modern science-fiction (WHAT'S IT LIKE OUT THERE?) He is writing better now than he ever did and THE BROKEN STARS is Hamilton combining the two sides of his writing at the top of his form. This is a story which will not be forgotten.*

1

The small alien ship flew at incredible speed through the Marches of Outer Space. Everywhere about it were suns, flaming suns and ashen, dying stars and dark cindery hulks, with their planets and moons and dangerous trailing shoals of drift. A cosmic jungle, far beyond the demesne of the great star-kingdoms; a jungle not to be invaded without due caution.

Yet the men inside the ship were not worried by their demented progress.

John Gordon, at the moment, was too shaken to be worried about anything. He stared out through the after view-screen, at the wilderness in which the orange sun of Aar had already vanished, still not believing their escape. He was only faintly aware of the fact that the chair he sat in was too small for his muscular, stocky frame, or that the ceiling curve of the control-room was much too close over his head. Or that the metal surfaces around him were of a sickly and unpleasant blue, like the skin of a drowned man.

After a while he turned from the view-screen to look at Shorr Kan, whom he did not quite believe either. But there he was, managing to look as graceful as a cat even with his long length doubled into a quite inadequate seat. He looked back at Gordon, the dark well-remembered face with the lean bones and sardonic eyebrows, and he grinned.

"Yes we did," he said. "We made it. Thanks to me."

Gordon let out a long breath and



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passed his hand over his own face, rubbing the strong square angles of it like a sleeper waking. "Yes," he said, "I guess we did. Hull?"

Hull Burrel was at the main controls, looking perfectly placid and content even though he was perched ridiculously on a small chair, with his knees under his chin and his big shoulders bowed. It was only then that Gordon began to get the perspective. The control-room was like the inside of polished egg, made to hold much smaller birds than these.

"Well," said Shorr Kan, "the H'harn are a small race. No reason for them to build for our comfort."

Hull, who towered even over Shorr Kan, lifted his head, bumped it on some overhanging equipment, and retracted it again, swearing. His big hands poked tentatively at the banks of switches and levers and dials, all marked with unintelligible symbols. Even to Gordon's untutored eye, the control system looked completely alien, beyond understanding.

Shorr Kan was watching the forward view-screen now, the sub-electronic mirror that converted mass-impulses from the normal space they were tearing through, literally, at FTL+ into images the eye could see. He appeared fascinated by what was pictured there.

"At a guess," he said, "what would you estimate our speed to be?"

Gordon now looked at the screen. The stars, dead and living, and the banks of drift, all the tumbled splendor of the Marches, seemed to him to be almost stationary.

"We don't seem to be moving at

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all," he said. "Or at least, not much."

But Hull was staring at the screen as well, his copper-colored face rapt. "We're moving all right," he said. "No ship in our galaxy can move as fast as this." He answered Shorr Kan's question. "No, I couldn't guess. I'd have to have another point of reference and . . ."

Shorr Kan said, "Is it safe, in this smother?"

The Antarian turned around, his eyes just a trifle vague. "Safe? Why, I suppose . . ."

Gordon felt suddenly very nervous. If Shorr Kan, that tough and seasoned veteran, was worried about their velocity, it was something to worry about.

"Hull," he said, "why don't you slow down?" And that, he thought, must be an all-time first; back-seat driving in a starship.

"Mm," said Hull, and scowled down at the child-sized controls. "I can't read these blasted things." His voice went up a notch. "How am I going to set a course out of the galaxy and all the way to the Magellanic Clouds," he demanded, "when I can't read the instruments?"

"Set a course *where?*" said Gordon, astonished. "What are you talking about?"

Hull shook his head. "The Magellanic Clouds. Where the damned H'harn come from. Weren't we going there to reconnoiter them?"

"This little ship reconnoiter a subgalaxy?" exclaimed Gordon. He rose and went to Hull, looking at him anxiously. "Hull, are you dreaming?"

Shorr Kan joined them, stooping slightly. "That," he said, "is the most idiotic suggestion I ever heard."

Hull turned on him furiously, his eyes quite normal now. "Idiotic, is it? You were the one who proposed it! You said we'd go out to the Clouds and learn what the H'harn are planning against the Empire!"

Shorr Kan's body suddenly stiffened, as though with shock. "That's ridiculous. But . . . but I *did* say that."

There were times when his dark face could get as hard and cold and keen as a swordblade. This was one of the times.

"Tell me, Hull," he said swiftly. "Why did you choose this H'harn ship for our escape?"

Gordon said, "You chose it, Shorr Kan. You said it was faster."

"Ah," said Shorr Kan. "I did, didn't I? But how have you been able to fly the thing, Hull?"

Hull looked puzzled. "Why, I just guessed at the controls . . ."

"Guessed?" mocked Shorr Kan. "You took off like an expert, in a ship whose design is completely alien to you."

His black eyes flashed from Hull to Gordon. He dropped his voice.

"There's only one answer to the things we've been doing. We've been under alien influence. H'harn influence."

A feeling of terrible cold swept through John Gordon. "But you said the H'harn couldn't use their mental power at any great distance!"

"And that's true," said Shorr Kan. He turned, his gaze going to a closed bulkhead door that was the way to the after part of the ship. "We



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haven't been back there yet, have we?"

The implication hit Gordon squarely in the center of his being. There are different sorts of fear, and many degrees of fearing, but what he felt for the H'harn was the ultimate in sheer sickening terror. He found difficulty in pronouncing his words.

"You think there was a H'harn in this ship all the time? That there is one in it *now*?"

He stared at the door, seeing the creature in his mind's eye . . . the small, oddly distorted, oddly boneless thing with its limber, bobbing gait, a faceless, softly-hissing enigma robed and veiled in gray, hiding a dreadful power . . .

"I think so," muttered Shorr Kan. "Lord knows how many of the little monsters there are on Cyn Cryver's world, but I thought there was only one on Aar . . . the one we killed. But now I remember, Cyn Cryver did speak of the H'harn on Aar as *they*.

Hull Burrell and Gordon looked at each other. It was still fresh in them, the horror they had felt on Aar when the H'harn named Susurr had come toward them. Gordon said flatly, "Good God."

Then he turned to Shorr Kan to ask what they should do. And he was almost too late.

"If there's a H'harn on this ship," Shorr Kan said, "there's only one thing to do. Find it and kill it."

With a decisive gesture, he drew the stunner from his belt.

Gordon lunged.

He brought Shorr Kan to the floor in a crashing tackle and grabbed the

"You keep it . . . I'll keep the charge-chamber, and that way neither one of us can use it if the H'harn takes control of . . ."

He never finished the sentence. A bolt as of black lightning, the cold paralyzing force that he had felt before at Teyn, exploded with terrifying silence in his brain. There was no shield against it, no possibility of struggle. It was like death. And simply, he died.

Just as simply and suddenly, he hand that held the stunner. He clung to it while Shorr Kan fought him like a tiger, and all the time Shorr Kan's face was blank as something carved from wood and his eyes were fixed and glazed and unseeing.

Gordon yelled, "Hull, help me!"

Hull was already leaping forward. "Then he is a traitor? I always knew we couldn't trust him . . ."

"Not that," said Gordon, panting for breath. "Look at his face. I've seen that before . . . he's under H'harn control. Get that stunner out of his hand!"

Hull carefully peeled back Shorr Kan's fingers until he let go of the weapon, and as soon as it passed into the Antarian's hands Shorr Kan sagged and went limp. Like someone coming out of a faint he looked up at them and mumbled, "What happened? I felt . . ."

But Gordon had forgotten about him. He wrenched the stunner away from the startled Hull and disarmed it feverishly by withdrawing its charge-chamber. Then, just as quickly, he tossed the useless stunner back to Hull.

lived again. He was on the deck and his hands were around Shorr Kan's neck, throttling him, and Hull Bur-



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rell was pulling him away with such force that he could hear the sinews cracking in the Antarian's back and shoulders.

"Let go," Hull was snarling. "Let go or I'll have to knock you out . . ."

He let go. Shorr Kan rolled over and slid away, his mouth wide and his chest heaving. "All . . . all right, now," Gordon stammered. Feeling sick and shaken, he started to get up. But instead of releasing him, Hull's grip abruptly tightened. His knee slammed into Gordon's back and Gordon fell forward hard and his skull rang on the steel deck.

The H'harn had shifted its attention once more. Glassy-eyed and blank as a statue, the Antarian left Gordon and flung himself on Shorr Kan and tried earnestly to kill him. Shorr Kan managed to fight him off until Gordon could collect his wits and help. Together they got Hull down and held him, and then between breaths he went flaccid and lay looking at them, his eyes wild but quite sane.

"Me, too?" he said, and Gordon nodded. Hull sat up and put his head in his hands. "Why doesn't it just kill us and get it over with?"

"It can't kill us," said Shorr Kan. "Not with mental force. It could destroy our minds, one by one, but I don't think it wants to be flying through the Marches with three mindless maniacs."

He glared at the closed door aft. "If we try to get back at it we'll never make it . . ."

Gordon glanced up at the viewscreen, where the thronging stars and shoals of drift crept with such deceptive slowness. This was one of the most crowded regions of the Marches, and Shorr Kan had worried about their velocity. Perhaps . . .

With desperate inspiration, so desperate that he did not pause a second to think about it, Gordon sprang to the control-board. He began to hit the enigmatic controls at random, punching, twisting, turning them this way and that.

The little ship went crazy. It flashed toward a great belt of drift, then veered wildly off toward a blue sun and its planets, then zoomed zenithward toward a double-double whose four suns yawned before them like great portals of flame. Hull Burrel and Shorr Kan were tumbled against the bulkheads, crying out their surprise.

The H'harn hidden aft must have been startled, too startled for the moment to stop him.

Hull scrambled toward him. "You'll wreck us!" he cried. "Are you daft? Get your hands off those controls, for God's sake!"

Gordon shoved him aside. "It's our only chance to deal with that creature. Get it scared . . . Both of you, keep hitting all the controls at random. If we all three do that, it can't control us all."

Hull stared at the viewscreen and the dizzying whirl of suns and worlds and deadly drift. "But we'll crash. It's suicide!"

Shorr Kan had seen Gordon's point. "He's right, Hull. It's risking a crash, but it's the only way." He pushed Hull toward the control-board. "Do it!"



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Dazed and only half understanding Hull obeyed. The three of them pushed and pulled at things like madmen. The ship corkscrewed, stood on its tail. The protective gravstasis operating inside the ship shielded them from the worst accelerative effects, but the sheer insanity of flying in this mad fashion was dizzying.

"All right back there!" Gordon yelled. "You can read my mind, you know what I'm saying! If we crash and die, you die with us! Try to take control of any of us again and we *will* crash!"

He waited for the icy mental bolt to hit him, but it did not. And after a minute there came into his mind a telepathic feeler that was cold, alien, and . . . *fearful*.

"Stop!" thought the hidden H'harn. "We cannot survive if you continue this. Stop it!"

2

Sweat stood out on Gordon's forehead. He looked at the viewscreen and saw that the ship was now heading with all its tremendous speed toward the irregular sprawl of a filamentary nebula. That nebula would be rotten with drift.

He took his hands off the controls. "Let be," he told the others. "But be ready to hit them again any moment."

An anxious thought came from the H'harn. It could see quite clearly, Gordon knew, what was ahead of them, using his eyes as viewer. "You must change course or we will perish."

"Change course to where?" said Gordon harshly. "To the Magellanic sub-galaxy? That's where you were taking us with your hypnotic suggestions."

"It is necessary for me to return there," came the sullen thought. "But we can make a bargain."

"What kind of a bargain?"

"This," thought the hidden H'harn. "Set a course toward an uninhabited world that is not too far, and land there. You may then leave the ship.

Gordon looked at the others, Hull's coppery face sweating and haggard, Ahorr Kan's mask of grim doubt.

"I got the thought," Shorr Kan nodded. "You too, Hull? Anyway, I don't think much of it for a bargain. The thing will try to trick us somehow.

"No!" came the sharp thought.

Gordon paused, undecided. He could see no other arrangement that might even possibly work. The situation was fantastic . . . the three of them in the racing ship, each of them vulnerable to the colossal mental power of the creature back there, but only one at a time.

A thought crossed his mind but he instantly suppressed it. It was nothing he wanted to think about even for one moment. He looked at the other two and said,

"I think we've got to risk it."

"Very well," came the quick, eager thought of the H'harn. A little too quick, a little too eager. "I will direct your companion how to fly the ship to that world."

"As you did before?" jeered



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Gordon. "Oh, no. You're not putting Hull under control again and then using him in some underhanded fashion."

"But how then. . . .?"

Gordon said, "You will explain to Hull the controls of the ship, by direct telepathic statements. He will repeat aloud to us, each of your explanations. If at any moment Hull shows the slightest sign of being under your mental dominance, we'll hit the controls and keep on hitting them until we crash."

There was a long pause before any answer came. Hull was looking agonizedly at the screen, and Gordon saw in it that the filamentary was terribly close, winding across space like a gigantic ragged serpent. The serpent was diamonded with points of light that came and went, bigger fragments of drift that caught the light of distant suns and then lost it.

He thought grimly that if the H'harn did not make up its mind soon, there was not going to be any escape for any of them.

That thought pressured the H'harn into hasty decision, as Gordon had hoped it would.

"Very well, it is agreed. But your companion must take over at once."

Hull Burrel seated himself at the controls. Gordon and Shorr Kan leaned on either side of him, watching his face for any sign of change, watching the controls, and watching each other.

He says this is the main lateral-thrust lever," said Hull, putting his hand on a little burnished lever. "Fifty degrees east . . . seven of these little vernier-marks to the left."

The gigantic snake of the nebula slid out of their view in the screen.

"Zenith and nadir thrust control," muttered Hull, touching still another of the small levers.

The star-fields changed in the screen. The ship, still running at a velocity far higher than that of any craft ever known in the galaxy, moved again with apparent sanity through the jungle of suns on a course parallel with the rim of the galaxy, arrowing slightly zenithward in the starry swarm.

Gordon felt a tension that was now unbearable. He knew that the H'harn did not mean to let them escape, that the thing had something up its sleeve, some trap that would close directly they landed . . .

*Don't think of that,* he told himself. Keep your mind on Hull and what he's saying about the controls.

After what seemed an endless time, a yellow sun very like Sol lay dead ahead, and its disc grew as the ship flew on. Presently they could see the planet that swung around it.

"Is this the world?" Gordon demanded.

"YES," Came the H'harn's answering thought.

The creature then gave Hull further telepathic instructions, and Hull said, "Deceleration control . . . two notches," and touched another lever.

Gordon watched Hull closely. If the H'harn meant suddenly to seize their pilot, it was likely to be fairly



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soon. So far, Hull's face remained normal. But he knew how swiftly the change could come, to that unhuman stiffness. And if that happened . . .

*Don't think about it. Don't think!*

The planet rushed toward them, a green-and-gray globe, its surface hidden here and there by belts of cloud. Gordon caught the glint of a sea, far around its curve.

"Deceleration . . . two more notches, to reach stationary orbit," repeated Hull, voicing the instructions of the H'harn.

And after a few minutes, "Needle centers on third dial . . . orbit stationary. Trim lever, four notches . . ."

He touched the im lever and the ship rotated, then began descending tail-first toward the surface of the planet. Hull Burrell said, "Descension control . . . three notches." They went down through streaming clouds, and a little muted bell rang somewhere.

"Friction alarm," said Hull. "Reduce descension by two notches." He moved the lever under his hand.

They looked downward, through the aft viewscreen, and saw the planet rising toward them. There was a green landscape, with forests and plains, and the silver ribbon of a looped river. Gordon heard the quick breathing of Shorr Kan and thought, *He's as keyed up as I am . . . think about Shorr Kan . . . think whether you can trust him . . .*

"One-half notch less," said Hull, and moved the lever again.

They were a thousand feet above the forest when Gordon struck. He did it with the abrupt ferocity of a man who will not have a second chance and knows it. Hull Burrell's hand still held the lever. Gordon hit it and smashed it downward. The lever went wide open and there was a shrieking roar of air.

Hull shouted something and the next moment the tail of the ship hit the ground. Gordon went flying, with the sound of the ship's collapsing fabric loud in his ears. He hit the control panel and the breath went out of him. There was a long falling cadence of grindings and crackings and metallic screamings. Gradually they ceased. By the time Gordon got his head cleared and his breath back, the ship was quite still, canted drunkenly over on one side.

Shorr Kan was picking himself up, streaming blood from a cut on the forehead. Hull Burrell lay on the deck, limp and motionless. In a panic, Gordon pawed at him, rolled him over and felt for the pulse in his throat.

"Dead?" asked Shorr Kan. He had opened his tunic and was tearing a strip of cloth from his undergarment.

Still gasping for breath, Gordon poked up one of Hull's eyelids and shook his head. "Unconscious. I don't think he's badly hurt."

Shorr Kan pressed the bit of cloth over the gash in his head. It rapidly became crimson. "Lucky," he said. "We could all be dead." He glared at Gordon. "Why in the name of hell did you crash us . . ."



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He suddenly fell silent. Shorr Kan had one of the quickest minds that Gordon had ever met. He was now looking at the after part of the alien ship.

The bulkheads back there were crumpled like tin. The tail of the descending ship had taken the full force of the impact. Shorr Kan turned egain to Gordon, with an arctic light in his black eyes.

He whispered, "Do you get anything now?"

Gordon too had been listening, straining not only with his ears but with his mind.

"Nothing," he said. "Not the faintest flicker. I think the H'harn must have died in the crash."

"It would pretty well have to be dead, the way the ship is wrecked back there," said Shorr Kan. "Of course. That's what you were trying to do, kill the H'harn in the landing."

Gordon nodded. He felt horribly shaky, a reaction from the ordeal of mental battle.

"It was never going to let us walk away free," he said. "That was sure. I took a chance on getting it first."

Shorr Kan refolded the sopping cloth and nodded. The gesture made him wince. "I heard a little from Cyn Cryver about the H'harn and I observed the one on Aar. I can tell you that the creature would have destroyed our minds, at the least, before it let us go free."

Hull Burrell remained unconscious so long that Gordon was beginning to worry. Finally he came around, grumbling that every bone in his body was broken, then adding that it was worth it to be rid of the H'harn. He looked at Gordon with narrowed, appraising eyes.

"I'm not sure I'd have had the nerve to risk it," he said.

"You're a spaceman," Gordon said. "You know too well what might have happened." He nodded to the crumpled hull plates. "Drag your fractures over here and give us a hand."

Hull laughed and shook his head, and came. It took them a long time to lever the crumpled plates of the hull wide enough open so that they could edge through. The climbed out into warm yellow sunshine and dropped to the green-turfed ground.

Gordon looked around wonderingly. This world, at least this portion of it, had a startling similarity to Earth. The men stood at the edge of a green forest, and not far from them the forest thinned and they had glimpses of a rolling plain. The sky was blue, the sunshine golden, the air sweet and full of the dry fragrance of grasses and leaves. It was true that the individual shrubs, trees, and plants he saw were quite unlike terrestrial ones in detail, but the overall resemblance to a scene in the temperate zone of Earth was very great.

Hull Burrell had other thoughts. He was frowning gloomily at the half-crumpled ship that had brought them so far across the void of intergalactic space.

"That one will never fly again," he said.

"Even if it was undamaged, you couldn't handle it," said Gordon. "It was only through the H'harn's mental control that you managed."



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Hull nodded. "So here we are, without a ship, on an unhabited world."

Gordon knew what he meant. Stranded.

"But *is* it uninhabited?" said Shorr Kan. The cut had now ceased to bleed. "I know the H'harn said it was, but those creatures are the fathers of lies. Just before we crashed I thought I saw a distant something that might be a town."

"Mm," said Gordon uneasily. "If this world is inhabited, and the H'harn was making for it, it's extremely likely to be one of the non-human worlds in this part of the Marches that follow Narath Teyn . . . and the Counts."

Shorr Kan said, "I've considered that. I think we had better reconnoiter, and I think we had better be blasted careful about how we show ourselves." He pointed. "The town was off there somewhere."

They started along the edge of the forest, keeping a little way back within the trees for cover. The green plain out beyond them remained empty, rolling away to the horizon. There were a few odd birds and small animals in the forest, making small sounds, and the wind rustled the trees in a familiar way. But there was a quietness here that Gordon did not like. He handed the charge-chamber to Hull.

"Put it back in the stunner," he said. "It isn't much, but it's something."

"What I don't understand," Hull said, while he did that, "is the *why* of it. Why did the H'harn direct us into his ship by mental influence and then try to take us back with it to the Magellanic Clouds? What use would we be to it?"

"You and I would be no use at all," said Shorr Kan. "The thing wanted Gordon."

Gordon nodded. "That's the only explanation, I think. Its attention was aroused when we killed the other H'harn and started to escape. It would undoubtedly have probed our minds then, even though we were not conscious of it."

"So . . . it probed your mind," said Hull. "What is there about you that would make it want you so badly?"

Shorr Kan smiled ironically. "Tell him, Gordon."

"Look, Hull," Gordon said. "You learned about me so recently, at Throon, that you haven't yet realized the implications of what you learned. The emperor himself told you how I . . . that is to say, my mind . . . was in possession of the body of Prince Zarth Arn at the time of the star king's great war against the League."

Hull said irritably, "I'm not likely to forget that. How it was really you who led the Empire fleet, and used the . . ."

He stopped abruptly. His mouth was still open and he forgot to close it.

"Exactly," said Gordon. "It was I, and not Zarth Arn, who used the Empire's secret weapon, the Disruptor."

"The Disruptor," said Shorr Kan, sharpening the point, "which was used by the Empire thousands of years ago, to repel the H'harn when



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they first tried to invade this galaxy."

Hull closed his mouth and opened his eyes wider, looking at Gordon. "Well, of course. If the H'harn could get their hands . . . or whatever they use in place of them . . . on anyone who knows the secret of the Disruptor, which only the Empire's royal family are supposed to know, they'd be awfully happy. Yes, I see. But . . ."

"I suggest," said Shorr Kan, "that you defer further discussion and take a look out there."

The edge of his voice cut them silent. They peered out of the trees at the great plain.

Miles out from the forest, and far away to their left, a group of specks moved ecross the surface of the plain. At first Gordon thought they were running game animals. But there was something wrong about their gait and pace and the way that they rose and fell a little above the ground.

The group swept along, not coming any nearer to the forest but heading in a straight line in the direction that Gordon thought of as north. As they passed by, he could see them more clearly . . . and he did not like what he saw.

The creatures were neither running nor flying, but doing a little of both. They were stubby-winged avian bipeds, much bigger than Korkhann's people, and lacking the civilized amenity of feathers. They had remained closer to the reptile; the equivalent, say, of the pterodactyl. Wings and body were leathery smooth, a gray or tan in color, and their heads were hideously quasi-human, with bulging skulls above long cruel beaks that seemed to have teeth in them. As with Korkhan's folk, the wings served as arms also, with powerful claw-like hands.

Gordon got the impression that those hands were carrying weapons.

## 3

The yellow sunshine poured down, and a little breeze ruffled the green foliage of the trees around them, and it was all so much like a June day on Earth that Gordon could hardly believe he stood upon the planet of a distant star.

That was what made the winged bipeds out there so frightening. It was like encountering the grotesque creatures in Ohio or Iowa.

"They're Qhallas," said Shorr Kan. "When Narath of Teyn came to Aar to confer with Cyn Cryver, he brought a motley lot of his non-humans along . . . and there were two of these creatures among them."

The men crouched down, and watched. The nightmarish group swept by, looking neither to right nor left, heading straight north. They became distant dots and vanished.

Shorr Kan shaded his eyes, peering across the plain. "There . . . in the distance," he said.

They could just see another group of flying, racing specks, far away. They were heading north also.

The same direction as the men. Not, Gordon thought, a comforting idea.

"At any rate," Shorr Kan said, "it



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confirms my belief that I saw a town of some kind. Probably a landing field there as well." He frowned, his eyes abstracted but very keen. "I think there'll be some of the Counts' ships arriving here soon, and the Qhallas are going to meet them I think that this is the gathering of Narath's unhuman clans."

Something tightened painfully in Gordon's belly. "Gathering . . . for what?"

"For the long-planned attack," said Shorr Kan quietly, "by the Counts of the Marshes and Narath's hordes, on Fomalhaut."

Gordon sprang to his feet. He set his hands around Shorr Kan's neck. He was shaking, and his eyes were as hot as blown coals.

"Attack on Fomalhaut? You knew this and you didn't tell me?"

Shorr Kan's face remained calm. So did his voice, though it was difficult enough to get it out from between Gordon's throttling hands.

"Has there been one minute since I helped you escape from Aar when we didn't have all the trouble we could handle without borrowing more?"

His gaze met Gordon's steadily, and Gordon let go. But he remained tense, gripped by a terrible fear. And with the fear came an overpowering sense of guilt. He should never have left Fomalhaut, and the Princess Lianna.

He had known, from the time when Narath trapped them on Teyn, that this attack was inevitable. He should have stayed by her, to do what he could. She had reproached him once that he loved adventure more than he did her, and he had been angry with her. Yet he had left her. Perhaps she had told the truth.

"How soon will the attack take place?" he asked. His voice was unsteady, so that he scarcely recognized it. He was dimly aware that Hull was talking also, and that his face was agitated, but he could not spare attention for anything but Shorr Kan's answer.

And Shorr Kan shrugged. "As soon as the combined forces are ready . . . whenever that may be. Cyn Cryver didn't tell me all his plans. But the ships of the Counts will go as a fighting escort for transports carrying the hordes of Narath Teyn."

"I see," said Gordon, and clenched his hands hard and forced himself to think. Panic now was not going to help either Lianna or himself. He asked, "What part are the H'harn going to play in this? You said there were only a scattering of H'harn agents in the Marches."

Shorr Kan shook his head. "I can't answer that. Cyn Cryver was very secretive about his relations with the H'harn. And of course I don't *know* anything beyond what he told me . . . and what he told me was probably two-thirds pure lie." He paused, and then said soberly, "My own feeling is that the H'harn are using Cyn Cryver and all the others as catspaws, in some fashion."

He smiled at them with a certain ruefulness. "These suspicions of the H'harn were what forced me to escape from Aar with you, just now. Those devils can probe your mind without your even knowing it, and



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there's no possible shield. At any moment they might have exposed the fact that I had my own plans which didn't exactly coincide with Cyn Cryver's."

"Have you ever played straight with anyone in your whole life?" demanded Hull Burrell.

Shorr Kan nodded. "Oh, yes. Often. In fact, I never use deceit unless there's something to be gained by it."

Hull made a sound of disgust. Gordon hardly heard them. He was walking back and forth, his fists clenched, his eyes staring out unseeingly over the sunlit plain.

"We've got to get back to Fomalhaut," he said, his voice harsh and rapid. "We've got to get there fast."

"That," said Shorr Kan, "will not be easy. The people of this world do not have space travel. You saw them. They're a pretty squalid lot."

Gordon's face set and tightened. "You said that some of the Counts' ships would likely land here soon, to take off these Qhallas for the campaign?"

"Ah," said Shorr Kan. "I think I see what's in your mind. We'll steal one of those ships when they come, and take off to warn Fomalhaut. Good God, man. Be sensible!"

Hull said, "He's a blackhearted rascal, but he's right, John Gordon. Those winged devils will be swarming where the ships land."

"All right," said Gordon. "All right. The fact still remains. We need a ship. Tell me how we get it."

Hull's big coppery face reflected nothing but baffled anger and distress. But Shorr Kan said, after a minute.

"There is one way it just *might* be done."

Both Gordon and Hull kept quiet, afraid to break the tenuous thread of hope. Shorr Kan stood biting his lip and thinking. They waited. Suddenly Shorr Kan said to Gordon, "Suppose we swing it. Suppose we get to Fomalhaut. If I know the Princess Lianna, she'll want to hang me the moment she sees me."

Gordon answered, "I'll see to it that she doesn't."

That was a large promise. Shorr Kan smiled, with a certain unpleasant humor.

"Can you guarantee that?" he demanded. "Can you guarantee that if she doesn't, someone else . . . say the Empire . . . won't do it for her?"

It was no good lying and Gordon knew it, much as he wanted to. "No, I can't guarantee it. But I'm almost sure that, if you've earned it, I have enough influence to save your neck."

"Almost is cold comfort," said Shorr Kan. "However . . ." He studied Gordon for a moment, and Gordon knew that he was going over swiftly in his mind all the alternatives, checking them once more before he committed himself. Finally he shrugged and said, "It'll have to do. Will you give me your word of honor that you'll do everything in your power to save me from execution or punishment?"

"Yes," said Gordon. "If you get us to Fomalhaut, I'll do that."

Shorr Kan considered. "I'll accept that. If I hadn't known from the past



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that you're a bit stupid about always keeping your word, I wouldn't trust you. As it is, I do."

Hull Burrell gave a grunt. Gordon ignored him and asked quickly, "Now . . . how do we get away from here?"

Shorr Kan's black eyes sparkled6. "There's only one possible way and that's the ships of the Counts that will be coming to pick up the Qhalla warriors."

"But you said yourself we could never capture a ship . . ."

Shorr Kan grinned. "That's right. But I have a certain talent for these things, and I've thought of a way."

He talked rapidly. "Listen. I helped you escape from Aar, and together we killed the H'harn Sussur there. But nobody on Aar, none of the Counts, really knows what happened. All they know is that the H'harm was found dead, the two prisoners . . . you and Hull Burrell . . . were missing, and that I also was missing."

"What are you getting at?" demanded Hull.

"This," said Shorr Kan. "Suppose I reappear here on the Qhalla world. Suppose I tell the Counts, when they come, that it was you two who killed the H'harn, and that when you escaped you took me along as a captive?"

"Would they believe that?" asked Gordon. "Wouldn't they want to know where we were and how you got away from us?"

"Ah, but that's the beauty of my idea," said Shorr Kan. "I'd have you two right with me, you see . . . your wrists bound, me

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covering you with the stunner. I'd tell them that when you wrecked the ship on this world, I turned the tables on you and overpowered *you*, and how could they doubt it with the proof right before their eyes? Isn't it ingenious?"

Hull Burrel let out a sound that was like a roar. He jumped for Shorr Kan, got him between his hands, and started trying to break him in half.

"Hull, stop it!" Gordon cried.

The Antarian turned a flaming, raging face toward him. "Stop it? You heard the bastard, didn't you? He's the same Shorr Kan as always, the man who intrigued his way to the top of the League of Cold Worlds, who nearly shattered the Empire with his scheming!"

Shorr Kan was a strong man but the big Antarian shook him like a terrier shaking a rat. "He's got a beautiful idea, surely. He'll march us in as prisoners, and since his escape didn't work he'll claim he never tried to escape, and throw *us* to the wolves!"

"Wait a minute!" said Gordon, pulling at Burrell's arm. "Let him go. Too much depends on this, Hull! Let's talk about it." But the seeds of suspicion were flourishing in Gordon's own mind, and he looked very coldly at Shorr Kan, as the latter stepped quickly back and away from Hull's reluctantly-opened hands.

"It does," said Gordon, "sound exactly like the kind of clever double-cross you've always been good at."

"Doesn't it, though?" said Shorr Kan, and smiled. "And I'll have to admit that I considered doing it just that way."

Gordon watched him narrowly. "But you changed your mind?"

"Yes, Gordon, I did." There was an odd note of patience in his voice now, as though he were explaining something to a very small child. "I've told you this before and I'll repeat it again. I could stay with the Counts and deceive them all down the line . . . they're like infants when it comes to intrigue. But I *can't* deceive the H'harn, and one stray thought would be the end of me. So I prefer to take my chances at Fomalhaut. It's simple arithmetic."

"With you, my friend," seid Gordon sourly, "nothing is simple. That's why I find this difficult to believe . . . because it *is* simple."

"Then let's find something else to pitch it on," said Shorr Kan brightly. "Friendship, for example. I've always rather liked you, Gordon. I've said so in the past. Doesn't that count for anything?"

"Oh, my God," said Hull Burrel softly. "Here's the biggest scoundrel in the galaxy, the man who tore it across with interstellar war, and he asks you to believe in him because he *likes* you. Let me kill him, John Gordon."

"I'm tempted," Gordon said. "But wait a bit." He paced up and down, trying to force himself to think clearly against the doubts and the agonized apprehension that filled his mind. Finally he said,

"It comes down to one thing. The only starships that will be coming to this world are the Counts' ships. And this is the only possible way we



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could hope to get on one of those ships. We have to gamble, Hull. Give him the stunner."

Hull Burrell eyed him incredulously.

Gordon said, "If you can think of another way, tell me."

Hull stood a moment with his head down like an angry buffalo. Then he swore and handed the weapon to Shorr Kan.

Instantly Shorr Kan levelled the stunner at them.

"Now you *are* my captives," he said, smiling. "Hull was absolutely right, I am going to turn you over as prisoners to the Counts."

Hull's fury went quite beyond reason. He rushed forward bellowing, in the face of the stunner, his hands raised for a killing blow.

Shorr Kan stepped agilely aside and let him blunder past. Then he laughed, a laugh of pure and wicked delight.

"Look at him," he said. "Isn't he lovely?" Hull had turned around and was standing uncertainly, his big hands swinging, staring in dumb amazement as Shorr Kan laughed again. "Sorry, Hull, I had to do it. You were so *sure*. I didn't have the heart to disappoint you." He tossed the stunner in the air, caught it again expertly, and shoved it into his belt. "Come along now. Before we encounter anyone, human or Qhalla, I'll have to bind your hands, but no need for that yet."

He gave Hull a friendly clap on the back. Hull turned dusky purple, but Gordon could not help grinning a little.

They started out across the rolling plain, heading northward in the direction in which the grotesque Qhalla bands had been hurrying. The sun sank down across the sky, and then as a rosy sunset darkened into twilight, there was a distant flashing and a rolling crack of thunder, thrice repeated in the clear evening, and they saw three shining starships come down.

Two hours later, they stood in the darkness of night and looked on a scene that might have been borrowed out of hell.

## 4

Red-flaring torches illuminated the crowded streets of what was less a town than a planless huddle of huts and shanties and ramshackle warehouses dumped at haphazard beside a ford of the river. The Qhallas were not civilized enough to need anything more than a meeting-place and market-place, and it was not a very big one. But it was thronging now with thousand of the winged bipeds, shuffling in the dusty lanes with such a press of bodies that the hut walls creaked at their shoulders. The shaking red light picked out their leathery wings and glistening reptilian eyes. Their hoarse voices made an incessant squawking din. They made Gordon think of a horde of demons, and they stank beyond belief.

The focus of all this big crowd was the three starships that rested on the plain outside the wretched town. Two of them were big cargo ships whose gleaming sides loomed up far beyond the torchlight, into the



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darkness. The third ship was much smaller, a fast little cruiser. The Qhalla horde milled between the town and the two bigger ships.

"Transports," said Shorr Kan, "to take Qhalla fighters for the attack on Fomalhaut. The small cruiser will be one of the Counts directing his end of the operation."

Hull Burrel said contemptuously, "That mob couldn't do much against a modern star-world."

"Ah, but this is only part of them, a very small part," said Shorr Kan. "All through the Marches, on wild worlds like this, the same sort of gathering will be going on. All the alien peoples will answer the call of Narath Teyn."

Gordon remembered how on Narath Teyn's own world, the Gerrn had idolized Lianna's half-mad cousin, and he could well believe that.

"The Counts' fighting ships will take on the Formalhaut Navy," added Shorr Kan. "And while they engage it, the massed transports will go through and land Narath Teyn's hordes for a direct assault on the capital."

The words conjured up a nightmare vision in Gordon's mind, and he felt again an agony of guilt that he had left Lianna.

"The Empire is the ally of Gomalhaut," said Hull Burrel. "They'll have something to say about it."

"But this will be a surprise. By the time an Empire fleet can get there, Narath Teyn may sit on the throne of Fomalhaut. It won't be easy then to unseat him."

Shorr Kan did not go on to voice the inevitable corollary, though it was in all their minds . . . that Lianna might not then be alive to regain her throne, leaving Narath Teyn as the sole and rightful heir.

Gordon demanded harshly, "Are we just going to stand here and talk about it?"

Shorr Kan looked thoughtfully down at the outlandish scene.

"If I take you two in as prisoners, I think I can convince whatever official of the Counts is in charge that I'm still Cyn Cryver's ally. But there's another problem." He indicated the milling, squawking, stinking mob of Qhallas. "The way they look, and from what I've heard of them, they'd tear us to pieces before we ever reached the ships."

"On that I believe you," said Hull. "They're a wild lot, and they're excited now to the point of madness."

Shorr Kan shrugged. "No use asking for a sticky end like that. We'll just have to wait until we have a better chance of getting through. But I'd better bind your hands now . . . when the chance does come, we'll have to move fast."

Gordon submitted to having his hands bound behind his back, though the prospect of being helpless among the Qhallas was not one he relished. He consoled himself with the realization that his hands wouldn't do him any good anyway. But Hull Burrell flatly refused.

"Oh, for God's sake," blazed Gordon. "What do you want to do, sit here and die?"

"I think we'll do that anyway," muttered Hull, looking at the Qhallas. But he put his hands



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behind him and let Shorr Kan tie them.

Then they sat in the grass, looking down toward the torchlit scene and hoping for some way to open for them, to the ships.

The blazing stars of the Marches looked down from the sky. The wind brought the sound of harsh shouting from where the torches flichered. Gordon smelled the pungent smell of the warm grasses on which they sat, and it was so familiar that it startled him.

Then he remembered. Long ago, when he was still John Gordon of New York, he had visited a friend who lived in the Ohio countryside. They had sat at night in a summer-warm meadow, and there had been fireflies, and the smell of the sun-scorched grasses had been just the same.

Gordon felt a sudden shuddering pang of disorientation. Who was he, and what was he doing here, far out of his own space and tiem? The sweet grass smell tortured him with longing to be home, on his own familiar world, where the beasts of the field did not speak with the voices of nightmare, nor form themselves into uncouth armies; where there were no H'harn and the stars were a long way off, and life held neither splendor nor gut-wrenching, soul-destroying fear.

But then a memory came to him. A memory of Lianna, and of the look in her eyes when he had parted from her. It was she that he had dreamed of. It was for her that he had dared the physical transition to this future universe of the star kings. And he knew that she was worth all risk and danger, and that nothing in that old life on his on Earth was worth anything compared to her. His momentary hysteria passed. There was only one thing that mattered now, and that was that he should live long enough to get to Fomalhaut with the warning.

Shorr Kan suddenly stood up, looking keenly toward the Qhalla town. "There!" he said.

Gordon and Hull stood up also. Two men . . . two human men . . . had emerged from the milling, noisy crowd of the Qhallas. They stood a little apart from the throng, as though they wanted air.

"One of them wears the insigne of the Mace," said Shorr Kan. "An ally or a vassal of Cyn Cryver. We'll have to take this chance. Get going!"

He gave Gordon and Hull a hard shove, and they started down the grassy slope, with Shorr Kan coming behind them with the stunner levelled at their backs.

"Hurry, damn it," snarled Shorr Kan. "Before they go back to the ship."

They staggered and almost fell, going in a half-run down the slope. Now Gordon saw that the two men, one of whom wore the errogant symbol of the Mace on his breast, were turning around as though to go back through the swarming Qhallas to the ships.

Shorr Kan shouted, a loud call. The two men turned. And the uproar of the Qhallas quieted suddenly es the winged bipeds also turned to see.

"*Run!*" said Shorr Kan.

They ran, toward the two men



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ahead. But the Qhallas had started to run also, toward the strangers, their wings half-spread, coming with that queer half-hopping, half-flying gait, uttering charking noises of anger.

Shorr Kan triggered his stunner. The foremost Qhallas fell and rolled The others sucked back for a moment.

The two men were staring in amazement. Now, by the distant torchlight, Gordon could make out their faces. One of them, who wore the emblem of a captain, was a compact, stocky man with a dark, tight face. The other man was younger, taller, gawkily astonished.

Gordon and Hull rushed toward them, their feet pounding, their bodies made awkward by their bound hands. Shorr Kan ran easily, one nervous eye on the Qhallas. And he shouted at the two men.

"Hold off your pets! I'm an ally of Cyn Cryver, bringing in prisoners."

Rather doubtfully, the older man turned and barked something at the Qhallas in their own hoarse tongue, and they began to gabble between themselves, confused now and a little disconcerted by the stunner. The three went past them and pulled up, Gordon and Hull panting, in front of Cyn Cryver's men.

Proud and haughty, the man in command, Shorr Kan demanded, "What is your name?"

"I am the Count Obd Doll," answered the stocky man, and stared at Shorr Kan as though he could not believe what he saw. "You . . . you are Shorr Kan. You disappeared from Aar with the two Empire captives . . ."

"These same two," said Shorr Kan, "and not from choice, I assure you. They took me as a hostage. Fortunately, they crashed their ship not far from here and in the confusion I was able to turn the tables on them."

"Why didn't you kill them?" asked Obd Doll. "Why bring them here?"

"Because Cyn Cryver wants them alive. Especially alive and able to talk. Where is he?"

Hesitantly, Obd Doll answered, "On Teyn."

Shorr Kan nodded. "Of course. The gathering place of the hordes. Take us there at once."

"But," said Obd Doll, "I am on orders here." He went on with other objections, and Gordon sweated in an agony of impatience. The Count appeared to be not too bright, and consequently unable to evaluate or adjust to a set of unexpected circumstances.

"Besides," he said, sticking his jaw out farther in a show of strength, "how am I to know . . ."

Shorr Kan's face darkened and his voice sank to a kind of tigerish purring.

"Little man," he said, "these two captives may hold the key to the whole campaign. Cyn Cryver is waiting for them. Just how long do you think it wise to keep him waiting?"

Obd Doll looked shaken. "Well," he said. "Well, in that case, yes, of course. May I suggest, sir . . . call the Count Cyn Cryver from our cruiser . . ."



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So far, so good, thought Gordon . . . but it was just a little late. The Qhallas had got over their first shock and settled their confusion. They wanted the prisoners, and they were closing in.

Shorr Kan had made a good try. But it was not much of an epitaph for them.

Only it seemed that Obd Doll had also made up his mind. He turned and roared at the Qhallas, obviously ordering them to stop. Apparently they had at least some sense of discipline, for they fell back a little, and Obd Doll said hurriedly,

"We had better go to the cruiser at once. These Qhallas . . . half savage . . . unreliable . . ."

It came to Gordon that the man was worried about his own skin. He didn't blame him. This savage winged horde, armed with crude guns and wicked-looking spears, looked as though they wanted to kill everything human in sight. Narath Teyn might have calmed them, but not these two men of the marches. In fact, the younger one practically invited attack, staring with unconcealed loathing at the bird-things, and he reeked so of fear that even Gordon could smell it.

They began to move toward the cruiser. The Qhallas pressed after them, hopping, shuffling, flapping, edging a little closer with every step. They squawked among themselves, their unlovely voices edged with mounting anger, and their eyes were bright with brainless fury, watching their prey move closer to sanctuary. They had a simple desire to tear these man-creatures into small pieces and peck at them like robins at chunks of suet. Gordon thought that their shaky discipline was not going to last out another ten paces. And now the reek of his own fear was acrid in his nostrils.

The younger of the two men had frankly given way to panic. He drew a small gray egg out of his pocket and said in a high skay voice, "I'd better use the numb-gas."

"No!" said Obd Doll. "Put that thing away, you idiot. We could numb a few but the others would be on us in a minute. Just move on, we're almost there."

The men staggered, buffeted by stubby wings, grabbed at by clawed hands. Obd Doll kept up a barrage of orders, and Gordon guessed that he was reminding them of their allegiance to Narath Teyn and their duty to obey, disperse, and load themselves into the transports. Whatever he said, it stopped them making up their minds to take the prisoners anyway until the men had reached the cruiser. The airlock door slammed shut on the horde outside, and Obd Doll mopped his brow with his hand, which was visibly shaking.

"A difficult lot to handle," he said. "If Narath were here there'd be nothing to it, but without him it's not a job I care for."

"You did well," said Shorr Kan. "Now call Teyn at once, and inform the Count Cyn Cryver that I have recovered the captives and will bring them to him there at once."

The ring of authority in his voice was such that Obd Doll all but saluted. "At once." Then he looked at Gordon and Hull Burrell, oppressed



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by a fresh doubt. "What'll we do with them? We have no brig . . . this is a dispatch and command cruiser . . ."

"Put them in one of the air-locks," said Shorr Kan. "Take all the space-suits out of the lock first. Then if they want to break out into space, they're welcome."

He laughed. Obd Doll laughed. The younger man laughed. Gordon did not laugh, and neither did Hull Burrell. They looked at Shorr Kan, but Shorr Kan's back was turned and he was already on his way, a man with important matters to attend to, a man in a hurry with no time to spare for two dupes he had deceived for his own purposes. Maybe.

Hull started a curse, but smothered it. They were shoved along by Obd Doll's men, toward an airlock on the other side of the cruiser. They were kept waiting until the helmets and suits were taken out of the lock, and then were thrust into the small coffin-like chamber. The inner door closed hermetically upon them, with a soft hissing sound that was very like mocking laughter.

Hull Burrell looked heavily at that immovable door. "Neat," he said. "They've got us nicely cooped up, and any time they decide to execute us, all they have to do is use the remote control to open the outer door of this lock." There was a manual control as well, almost suicidally handy. They carefully avoided leaning on it.

Gordon shook his head. "They won't do that. You heard Shorr Kan tell them that Cyn Cryver wants us alive."

"Yes, I heard him," said Hull. "I also know that we're the only living beings that can tell the truth about how he got away from Aar. Of course if he's really on our side, that's not important. But if he isn't . . . I don't think he'd want Cyn Cryver to hear it. I think he'd just blow us out into space and say we did it ourselves, two loyal Empire men choosing death before dishonor." Hull's face was set and very hard. "Do you honestly believe Shorr Kan is on our side, John Gordon?"

"Yes. Not out of nobility, but because we're his own best chance."

Hull remained standing for a time, frowning at Gordon. Then he sat down on the floor and leaned wearily against the bulkhead. "I wish," he said, "I had your simple faith."

Gordon would not have admitted it, but so did he.

## 5

The cruiser throbbed and hummed, flying through the Marches at highest speed. To Gordon, prisoned with the Antarian in the lock, it seemed to have been flying thus for an interminable period. Several times the inner door had opened and a scant ration of food and water had been thrust in to them by armed and careful men. But nothing else had happened, and they had not seen Shorr Kan again.

Gordon began increasingly to share Hull Burrell's skepticism about the reliability of Shorr Kan as an ally. So much so, that each time he heard the sound of a lock door



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opening he looked quickly at the outer one to see if this was not the moment that Hull had predicted, when they two would be catapulted on a blast of decompressed air into space and eternal silence. So far, it had always been the inner door that opened.

So far.

Agonized worry about Lianna and a deepening sense of his own guilt in leaving her added to Gordon's personal torment.

"Gordon, I understand but will you please shut *up*?" flared Hull Burrell finally. "There's not a damn thing we can do about it now, and you're getting on my nerves."

Gordon's own temper flared, but he refrained from uttering the words that came to his tongue. Instead he shut his jaw hard and went and sat down with his back against the wall of the lock chamber . . . a posture that had now become practically permanent . . . and thought what the hell and all of a man of action he had turned out to be.

A thin, almost undetectable odor roused him from his brooding. It was pungent, unfamiliar, and it had to be coming into the lock from the air-vent connected with the main life-support system of the ship.

Gordon jumped up and approached the vent and sniffed. And that was the last thing he remembered before he fell on his face on the hard deck and never even felt the impact.

He awoke vaguely to a thin hissing noise and the sensation of being shaken. Somebody was calling his name.

"Gordon! Gordon, wake up!"

The somebody sounded urgent. There was a tickling in Gordon's nostrils. He shook his head and coughed, trying to get away from it, and the effort caused him to open his eyes.

Shorr Kan was bending over him, holding a small tube that hissed and tickled as it released gas into Gordon's nose and mouth.

"Oxygen," said Shorr Kan. "It should clear the cobwebs. You've got to come out of it, Gordon . . . I need you."

Gordon still felt remarkably stupid, but his mind was beginning to function again.

"Gas . . . from the air-duct," he mumbled. "Knocked me out . . ."

Shorr Kan nodded. "Yes. Numb-gas. I managed to slip some bombs of it out of the ship's armory and drop them into the main air-channel of the life-support system."

Gordon stumbled up to his feet, hanging on to Shorr Kan for support. "The officers . . . the crew . . ?"

"Out like lights," said Shorr Kan, grinning. "Of course, I thoughtfully put on a space-suit beforehand, and then exhausted the air supply and replaced it before I took it off. Feeling better?"

Gordon struck away the oxygen tube. "I'm all right."

"Good. The officers and crew are sleeping like babies, but they won't sleep much longer. I need your help to secure them, and I need Hull to pilot the ship while we're doing it. I've got the cruiser on automatic pilot now, but the Marches are a risky place for that."



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He went over to Hull, who was still sprawled unconscious on the deck, and held the oxygen tube under his nose. Then he looked up at Gordon and showed his teeth in a smile.

"Didn't I tell you I'd get you free?"

"You did." Gordon shook his head, which ached blindingly. "And you have. I congratulate you. The only trouble is, my head is going to fall off from being saved."

When Hull Burrell opened his eyes and saw Shorr Kan bending over him, his reaction was almost comically instinctive. He blinked once, and then put up his big hands and closed them around Shorr Kan's throat. But he was still weak as a kitten, and Shorr Kan slapped his hands away and stood up.

"A grateful pair you two are," he said.

Gordon helped the big Antarian to his feet, speaking urgently as he did so, explaining. He wasn't sure how much Hull understood, until he said, "The ship's on auto-pilot, and you're needed in the bridge."

First and last a spaceman, Hull pulled himself together by main force, forgetting everything else.

"On auto-pilot? Here in the Marches?" He thrust Gordon aside and went with violent, if unsteady, haste out of the lock and down the companionway to the bridge.

Shorr Kan took a roll of tough wire from stores, and then he and Gordon set to work to tie securely the wrists and ankles of the unconscious officers and men.

Obd Doll, who lay in his own small cabin, was the last of them, and when they had him bound Shorr Kan looked thoughtfully down at him.

"I think I'll bring him round now with oxygen," he said. "He'd know the schedule that Cyn Cryver and Narath Teyn have set up for the attack on Fomalhaut, and that's something we've got to know."

"What," said Gordon, "If he won't talk?"

Shorr Kan smiled. "I think I can persuade him. You go on up to the bridge . . . you're the high-minded type and you'd only get in my way."

Gordon hesitated. It sounded like torture to him. But he thought of Lianna and what could be going to happen to her, and hardened his mind. He turned and went out of the cabin.

When he entered the bridge, Hull spoke without turning from the controls.

"I've laid as direct a course to Fomalhaut as possible. It'll take us too close to Teyn for comfort."

Gordon peered at the viewplate. The little cruiser was edging along the coast of a gigantic cloud of glowing dust, whose minute particles were so excited by the radiation of the stars drowned in it that it looked like a great mass of flame.

To Gordon, it seemed that the ship was merely crawling. He tried to contain his impatience. He also tried not to think of what Shorr Kan was doing.

After a while Shorr Kan came into the bridge. He took one look at Gordon's face and said seriously,

"Could you hear the cries all the way up here?"



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Gordon started for the door. "What did you do to him?"

Shorr Kan caught his arm. "I wouldn't go down there, Gordon. Not unless you . . ."

"Not unless I what?"

Shorr Kan's brows went up and his eyes laughed at Gordon. "Unless you want to be frightfully disappointed. Obd Doll has nothing worse the matter with him than a severe case of fright."

"You mean," said Gordon skeptically, "that he talked just because you threatened him?"

Shorr Kan nodded. "He did. You see the value of a reputation for ruthlessness. He knew I'd do exactly what I said I would, and so he told me all he knew without my having to do it. We'd soon find out if he lied, so I believe he told the truth."

"When does the fleet leave Teyn?" Gordon asked.

"Obd Doll couldn't narrow that down to definitely. He said it would depend on when the last contingents of non-humans came in . . . and they've been coming in, from all over the Marches, in answer to Narath Teyn's summons."

The words evoked in Gordon's mind a swift, ominous vision . . . of those alien hordes from worlds that had no human tradition at all, the scaled ones, the winged ones, the hairy ones, streaming through the Marches to foregather for assault on a great star-kingdom. Yes, they would come at the call of Narath Teyn. Narath was mad, Gordon was sure, but there was some quality in him that had made him a leader of not-men such as the galaxy had never seen before.

"But from what Obd Doll told me of the forces that have already gathered," Shorr Kan was saying, "I'd hazard a guess that they'll leave Teyn very soon, probably in the next few days, on their way to Fomalhaut."

"What about the H'harn?" asked Hull Burrell. "Where do they come into this?"

Shorr Kan shook his head. "Obd Doll swears he doesn't know. The H'harn have no fleet in this galaxy . . . they just sent some agents. He swore that only Cyn Cryver and one or two others know what part, if any, the H'harn are going to play."

Gordon, desperate and tense, tried to clear his mind of emotion and think.

"Hull, will the communication equipment of this ship reach as far as Fomalhaut?" he asked.

Burrell went into the little communications room behind the bridge. After a few minutes he came out again.

"It'll reach, but its power is so limited it would have to be audio only, and not telestereo."

Shorr Kan said sharply, "You're planning to warn Fomalhaut of the attack by communicator?"

"Of course," said Gordon. "You must see it yourself . . . the time element, and the very strong possibility that we won't make it to Fomalhaut ourselves, either in time or at all . . ."

"Before you leap to the transmitter think of this, Teyn and the fleet are between us and Fomalhaut.



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They will be bound to pick up our transmission. They'll have fast cruisers after us at once . . ."

Gordon made a brusque gesture. "We'll just have to take our chances. Fomalhaut has got to be warned."

"You didn't let me finish," said Shorr Kan. "The Counts are liable to hit Fomalhaut right away, before any strong defenses can be organized. In their position, that is what I would do."

Gordon had not thought of that possibility. He was racked by doubt.

Hull said incisively, "I'm with Gordon. Warn them, and gamble . . . the Counts, praise be, have neither your guts nor your gall . . ."

"I am touched," said Shorr Kan softly. "But what about us?"

"Take our chances, as Gordon said."

"What chances? They'll have us cut off within minutes after they pick up our transmission."

"I have an idea about that," said Hull.

He touched a control. On the big chartplate a sectional chart of a whole region of the Marches slid into view.

"All right," said Shorr Kan. "Look here."

Even Gordon, unused to reading the charts, could see when Shorr Kan pointed out their relative positions that they could hardly hope to get past the Teyn fleet once it was alerted. Not even by a miracle.

But Hull put his finger on a massive swarm of red points . . . a great reef, as it were, marked in the color of danger. The reef lay equally between them and Fomalhaut, one curving wing of it reaching out almost to Teyn.

"We could take a short-cut," Hull said, "through here."

Shorr Kan stared at him, astonished. "Through the Broken Stars?" Then he uttered a short laugh. "I revise my opinion of you, Hull."

"What," asked Gordon, "are the Broken Stars?"

Hull said, "Did you ever stop to think why the Marches of Outer Space are such a mess of debris?"

"I haven't," said Gordon, "had very much time to think of cosmic origins."

"The scientists tell us," said the Antarian, "that long ago two fairly large star-clusters were on collision course. One of the clusters slammed right into the other. Of course the looser parts of the swarms simply went through each other with only a few collisions, like two swarms of insects flying through each other. Even those collisions were enough to strew debris all along the Marches.

"But there was a much tighter, denser core of stars in each cluster, and those high-density knots of stars hit each other. The result was terrific. Stars tore each other up in such a high incidence of collisions that they formed a spinning mess of half-stars, bits of stars, shattered planets, whole planets . . . you name it. Scarcely anyone ever risks going into that jungle, but at least two scientific-survey ships have in the past crossed through it. If they had a chance so do we." As a sort of afterthought he added, "I don't have to tell you how thin it is."

Gordon said, "Take it."



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"Do I have a vote?" asked Shorr Kan.

With one voice, Hull and Gordon answered, "No."

Shorr Kan shrugged.

Gordon said to the Antarian, "When you send your message, tell Fomalhaut what we know about the Counts and the impending attack. *Don't* mention Shorr Kan . . . they'd never believe the story, and might put the whole warning down as a fake."

Hull nodded. "As you're *persona grata* at the court of Fomalhaut, I'll sign your name to it. Have you any recognition signal, so they can be sure it's you?"

Gordon thought. "Tell them it's from the man who once called Korkhann, their Minister of Non-Human Affairs, an overgrown mynah bird. Korkhann will know."

The little dispatch cruiser crawled on the chart until it was close to that ominous reef of red dots. Only then did Hull Burrell flash the message.

That done, they plunged headlong into the Broken Stars.

## 6

The place was like a star-captain's nightmare.

To the eye, the Broken Stars would have seemed only a region where the points of starry light were somewhat denser, through which the little ship seemed to crawl.

But the radar and sensor instruments saw it differently. They saw a region where debris of shattered suns, long cool and dark, whirled in small ovaloids, in spinning little maelstroms, in cones and disks and nests of wreckage. Shattered stones and dust that had once been planets lay in drifts. And the many surviving suns of wrecked star-cluster flared out fiercely as background.

The computers that took the radar impulses and directed the cruiser's flight along the chosen course were clacking like the chattering teeth of hysterical women. Hull Burrel, hunched over the board' listened to that uproar and watched the fast-changing symbols, and only occasionally reached his hand to vive the computers a new course. But when he did so, it was done with all the swiftness of which he was capable.

Gordon and Shorr Kan, standing behind him, looked at the viewplate which showed only the swarming points of light through which they barely seemed to move. They looked then at the flashing radar screen, and were awed.

"I was in Orion Nebula once but that was Child's play compared to this," said Gordon. "Have we got a chance at all?"

"We have," said Hull, "if we don't run into a bit of it too complicated for the radar to sense in time. But I'll tell you how you can improve our chances about a hundred percent."

"How?"

"By getting off my neck!" Hull roared, without turning. "Go and sit down. I can fly this damned suicide mission better without jawbone help."

"He's right," said Shorr Kan, and nodded to Gordon. They drew back. "There's nothing you and I can do now . . . but wait! Yes, there is one thing we can do. Back in a minute."

He went aft. Gordon sat down



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wearily in one of the chairs at he rear of the bridge that were intended for top-brass to sit in and harass worried pilots.

Hull had told them that radar showed no sign of pursuit at all. He had explained that when the Counts saw them dive into the Broken Stars, they would write them off as finished. And, he had added, they were probably right.

Shorr Kan came back holding a couple of plastic press-squeeze flasks filled with a pale, slightly milky-looking liquor. He grinned sardonically at Gordon.

"I was pretty sure that Obd Doll would have something stored away. The Counts of the Marches are a hard-drinking lot. Here, have one."

Gordon took the flask, but he stared up at Shorr Kan amazed. "A drink? Now? In this?" And he jerked his head toward the radar screen. "Any minute, one stray chunk of drift . . ."

Shorr Kan sat down. "Quite right. And can you think of a better time for drinking?"

Gordon shrugged. Maybe Shorr Kan made sense at that. All Hull wanted them to do was to keep quiet and let him make his long-chance gamble for life. Very well, then. He would keep quiet. He took the flask and drank.

The liquor might look a little like milk and it was bland going down, but it was hellfire when it hit his insides.

"Better than anything we had in the Dark Worlds," said Shorr Kan.

"I remember," said Gordon. "When Lianna and I were your prisoners on Thallarna . . . how long ago that seems! . . . and you said you'd offer us a drink but you didn't dare keep the stuff around because it would spoil your pose as the austere, patriotic leader."

Shorr Kan smiled wryly. "And much good it did me in the end." He looked at Gordon with a kind of admiration. "I had the whole galaxy in my grasp, and then you came along. By God, I have to hand it to you. You really were a spoiler."

Gordon turned and looked, startled, toward the viewplate. Nothing there seemed to have changed but there was a new sound, a screeching and screeking along the hull.

"Relax, Gordon," said Shorr Kan. "Just tiny particles, probably no bigger than atoms. Nothing to get jumpy about." He added, "When I think about it, in spite of the remarkable things you've done, you've nearly always had the jumps."

Gordon said between his teeth, "It seems a natural reaction when my life is in danger."

"Look at me," said Shorr Kan. "I'm in as much danger as you. More, for if we get out of this mess there's more trouble waiting for me. I'm flying for my life . . . the second time . . . me that was lord of the Dark Worlds. But do I get upset? Not a bit. If Shorr Kan has to go, he'll go with his head high."

He raised the flask with a theatrical gesture, but the smile on his dark face was mocking.

Gordon shook his head. There were times when Shorr Kan just reduced him to silence.

"So drink up and be of good



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heart," said Shorr Kan. "We'll get through, all will go well for you, and you'll save my neck when we get there . . . I hope!"

The computers were stuttering even more wildly, and when Gordon glanced forward he saw that the symbols were flashing in a swift stream across the radar screen. It seemed to him that Hull Burrel, hunched over the board, had his head bent in resignation, bowing to the inevitable end. Again Gordon turned his head quickly away.

He thought of Lianna. It was strange how, when everything was getting unreal to him in the slow freezing terror of approaching dissolution, she remained quite real. Even if he survived, and he didn't think the chances of that were too good, he felt that she was lost to him. But he thought of her, and was glad.

"You know, I've had an idea for a long time," Shorr Kan was saying, "that you're sort of a grain of sand in the machine, Gordon. I mean, you take someone out of his own context, his own time-frame, and hurl him into the future where he's got no business to be, and you put everything out of kilter. See how your coming, from the very first, had upset things all across the galaxy."

Gordon said dryly, "What you mean is that I upset the private plans of one Shorr Kan, that's all."

"Possibly," said Shorr Kan, with a courtly wave of his hand. "But tell me, what the devil was it like, that past time you came from? I asked you that before, but then you were lying to me and I couldn't believe a word of it.

"To tell you the truth," said Gordon, "it's getting just a little vague in my own mind." He drank and considered. "There was a man named Keogh who told me that this future I thought I had been in before was all a dream . . . I just hated the Earth as it was, he said, and wanted to get away from it, so I made up fantasies about star-kingdoms and great wars beyond the suns. Of course, nobody had left Earth then even to visit another planet, so it must have all seemed pretty wild to him."

"We have a name for people like that," said Shorr Kan. "Planet-huggers. Hang tight to your mother-world's apron strings, because if you get away from them you might find something awfully nasty and upsetting."

Gordon glanced forward again. "I'm not so sure," he said, "right at this moment that people who take that view are so awfully wrong."

Seen past the dark, hunched silhouette of Hull Burrel, the scene in the viewplate had slowly changed.

The points of fire that were suns seemed to be closer together. It was as though the ship was moving toward a rampart of blazing stars, and surely they were not going to try to go that way. Hull would surely change course soon.

But time went on and on, and they drank again, and the mighty rampart of suns seemed a little closer, and still Hull did not alter course. Gordon felt a growing impulse to go and pound on Hull's arm, to make him veer off, but he fought down



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that impulse, he didn't know a bloody thing about piloting a starship, and they had put the ship and themselves into Hull's hands and there was nothing to do but wait.

Shorr Kan seemed to understand how he felt. He said, "Less drift between the suns . . . their attraction tends to gather up a good bit of the debris. That's why he's going that way."

"Thank you for reassuring the nervous novice," said Gordon. "It's good of you."

Shorr Kan smiled. "I'm an awfully sympathetic person. Have another."

They sat, and drank, and Gordon tried not to look at the viewplate again or listen to the computers clacking. Time seemed to run on forever and it was almost a painful shock of change when the viewplate showed that they were out of the star-swarm and into the dark, clear deeps of open space.

Hull Burrel's great paw slammed down on the automatic pilot control. The big Antarian turned to them and for the first time in that flight they saw his face.

It was wild, exalted, and his voice came to them as a kind of hoarse triumphant shout.

"By God, I did it! I ran the Broken Stars!"

And then, as he looked at them, sitting with the nearly-emptied flasks in their hands, the wildness and excitement left him. He came back and stood over them, towering.

"I'll be everlastingly damned," he said. "While I did it, you two have been sitting here and drinking your heads off!"

Shorr Kan answered calmly, "You asked us not to bother you. Well, have we?"

Hull's craggy face turned scarlet. His chest heaved, and then he roared with laughter.

"Now," he said, "now I've seen everything. Get me one of those flasks. I think I want to get a little drunk myself."

They were out of the Marches, and the pure white eye of Fomalhaut gleamed like a beacon ahead.

It was many hours before Hull Burrel came back to the bridge, stretching and yawning. He started laughing again as he looked at Gordon and Shorr Kan.

"Through the Broken Stars with two topers," he said, and shook his head. "Nobody will ever believe it!"

A call came, hours later, from Hathyr, the throne-world of Fomalhaut. Hull took it.

"The whole fleet of Fomalhaut is on alert," he told them. "We're to land at the royal port on Hathyr."

"Any message for me?" asked Gordon.

The Antarian shook his head.

So that, Gordon thought, was that.

The radar screen showed ships in formation far out from Fomalhaut, cruising in stand-by formation.

"It's a good fleet," muttered Hull. "It's awfully good, and proved it in the fight off Deneb. But it's not very big, and the Counts will eat it up."

The diamond sun swept toward them, and then the growing purplish sphere of its largest planet. Hull brought the ship down over the far-spread towers of Hathyr City, toward the vast hexagonal mass of the royal



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palace. They landed in the cramped port behind it.

It seemed very strange to Gordon to step out and breathe natural air again, and look at a sun without a filter window between.

A small party of officers awaited them. They bowed and escorted them toward the huge bulk of the palace.

The old kings of Fomalhaut looked down in stone once more at Gordon, and this time he felt like snarling up at them.

"I know my place now," he wanted to tell them. "So the hell with you!"

But Shorr Kan strode along with an approving smile on his dark face, as though he were a visiting royalty who found the palace small but rather nice.

Despite his despair, Gordon had cherished a little hope. He did not know he had until suddenly it died, and that was when they three came into a small room where Lianna and Korkhann waited for them.

She was a beautiful as ever and her face was as cold and hard as stone as she looked at him.

He started to say something, but before he could speak Lianna had looked beyond him and her face went white with shock.

*"Shorr Kan!"*

Shorr Kan bowed magnificently to her. "Highness," he said, "it gladdens me to see you again. True, you and I have had a few small bothers and fusses, but that's all in the past, and I can say that it's forgotten now."

Lianna stared at him, absolutely stunned. Gordon felt an unwilling but tremendous admiration for Shorr Kan at that moment. Raise up the armadas of the League of the Dark Worlds, smite the Empire and its allies, bring about an armageddon of the whole galaxy, and then dismiss it all lightly as a few small bothers and fusses!

"I have to state," Gordon said, "that Shorr Kan, who did not die at Thallarna but was in the Marches, was the one who rescued us and enabled us to give warning of the Counts' coming attack."

He added forcefully, "I have promised Shorr Kan that he is safe here."

Lianna looked at him, quite without expression. Then she said, tonelessly, "If this is so, you are welcome, Shorr Kan, as our guest."

"Ah, a return of hospitality," said Shorr Kan. "It was not so long ago that you were my guest at Thallarna, Highness."

This grandly-spoken reference to the time when Gordon and Lianna had been Shorr Kan's prisoners brought a cough from Hull Burrel, who sounded as though he was choking on suppressed laughter.

Lianna turned to him. "Captain Burrel, we have been in touch with Throon. Jhal Arn has told me that elements of the Empire fleet are already on their way here."

Hull shook his head. "I'm afraid that will do no good, Highness. The Counts and Narath Teyn will know that they must strike at once."

All this time Korkhann had said nothing, peering at Gordon with those wise yellow bird-eyes that



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a grotesque feathered figure as his wings swept up and the little hands at the wing-tips clutched at Gordon's arm.

"But the Magellanians?" he cried.

"The H'harn?" said Gordon, startled.

"Is that what they call themselves?" Korkhann had an intensity about him that Gordon had never seen before. "Listen, John Gordon. Before I left Throon, the emperor and his brother, Zstyh Arn, let me read the old records of Brennbir's time, when the Magellanians came to this galaxy before. *They must not come again.* What I read . . ."

He stopped, his throaty voice quavering out into silence. When he spoke again, it was in a low, controlled tone.

"You know that I am a telepath. Not one of the greatest ones, but . . . I have felt a shadow over the galaxy . . . a shadow that deepens with each hour, dark, cold . . ."

Gordon shook his head. "We met only two of the H'harn. One we never even saw. Shorr Kan killed the other, to free us . . . we were in deadly danger . . ." *And I hope that saves your neck, Shorr Kan,* he thought. "But apparently there are only a few of them in the galaxy."

"They will come," whispered Korkhann. "They will come."

Lianna spoke. "One thing at a time. Narath and his beasts, and the Counts, are enough to deal with now. Korkhann, will you see that our guests are made comfortable . . ."

She emphasized the word "guests" but Shorr Kan never turned a hair. He made another courtly bow and said to her, "Thank you, Highness, for your welcome. I've always wanted to visit Fomalhaut, for I've been told it's one of the most beautiful of the minor star-kingdoms. Until later!"

And with that truly regal wipe in the eye, he turned and went out with Hull Burrel and Korkhann.

Gordon saw Lianna turn toward him. Her face was still stony white, and there was no expression at all in her eyes.

She came closer to him and her small hand flashed and gave him a stinging slap across the mouth.

Then her face changed. It moved like that of a nasty little girl having a tantrum. She put her head on his shoulder, and she said,

"Don't you ever leave me again, John Gordon. If you do . . ."

He felt the wetness of tears against his cheek.

Incredulous, caught by wonder, Gordon held her. He thought, not Zarth Arn . . . *John Gordon.*

He thought that Narath Teyn and the Counts might come, that the H'harn might come . . . but that he, John Gordon, had crossed the ages to find something and that now he had found it.

The End



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*The idea here is one that's been around for a while . . . but ve rarely seen it done with the deftness, economy, the irony im- acted in 1800 words here. But, on the other hand, this story is by lenry Slesar and Slesar only begins where lesser writers take for ranted . . .*

# BALL OF THE CENTURIES

## HENRY SLESAR

"Mike," the young man said oarsely the double Scotch with the heap suit and grieving eyes, "Mike, o you believe in fortune-tellers?"

"My name's Arnold," the barten- er said. "You're thinking of another oint. This is the Happy Time es- ablishment, on Pearl Street."

"I'm all mixed up. I been walking or hours. And you *look* like Mike. ut what about it, my question?"

"Fortune-tellers? Like them gyp- ies in the empty stores?"

"No," the young man said thought- ully. "He wasn't a gypsy. He was a artner in the Eat-Rite Luncheon- tte, right across the street from ity Hall. Little guy with a face like tuna. Met him in the Marriage icense Bureau. Thought he was a oke then, but now, brr, I know dif- erent about that little fortune-telling una-faced lunchman, Mike."

"Arnold," the bartender sighed, eaning on his elbows.

We went there to get our license, seven years ago. We were standing at the window, formalizing our in- tent as it were, when Eileen notices the little guy on a bench, shaking his head at us. Well, I sort of snick- ered and bent over to sign away my bachelorhood, and the little guy makes a noise. He says, "Ah-ah!" and he waggles his finger in the air. Then he comes over.

"Ah-ah!" he says again, "I wouldn't do that, mister."

"Wouldn't do what?"

"Sign that license."

Eileen grabbed my arm and look- ed at him in pure hatred, figuring him like I did, for a misogynist nut.

"Please," he said solemnly, "I'm telling you this for your own good. You mustn't go through with this marriage."

"And why not?" I said.

"Because it won't work out. I know it won't. You'll be miserable. You'll hate each other."

Now that was pretty wild, con-



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sidering I was crazy about Eileen and the insanity was mutual.

"Go turn yourself in," I advised.

"But I *saw* what's going to happen to you. I saw you both, in the Ball of the Centuries!"

"Ball of the What?"

"Look, my name is Kessel, I'm a partner in the lunch counter across the street. I go to auctions, that's my hobby. A couple of months ago I bought this crystal ball, and it says right on it, engraved in that old script, Ball of the Centuries."

We looked blank.

"You heard of Nostradamus? The guy who predicted the future? Some people think he had a crystal ball, and that's how he wrote the Book of the Centuries. *I got that ball.* A six-dollar bid, can you imagine? And I've seen things in it. I've seen *you.* Both of you. Now now. Not tomorrow. *Years* from now. Married. Poor. Yelling at each other. Awful!"

"He's a sick man," Eileen said flatly. "Goodbye, Mr. Kessel, go make lunch." Me, I was still curious.

"Al right," I said. "So what did you see?"

"It was all kind of blurry," he said, "but it was you I saw you getting your license. I saw you getting married. I saw you—"

"Careful, buddy."

"I saw you years later, in some crummy apartment. Wash hanging in the living room. Baby screaming its head off. Your wife pregnant. You sitting in the kitchen, trying to read some kind of school book, yelling at your wife to shut the kid up. She yells back. She says the kid's too much for her, that she wants her mother over to help. You sa over your dead body. She says, drop dead, she's coming tomorro and staying two weeks. You thro the book at the wall. She lets with a wet shirt, voom, right in yo face. That does it. You slam out the house. You're never coming bac Never!"

Eileen dragged me back to th window. "Now you know he's a nut, she says. "My mother hasn't bee out of Canton, Ohio, in forty-fiv years."

"Please," the guy begs, with tear so help me in his eyes. "You mustn get married, you can't!"

"Why's it so important to you?" asked.

"Because it is! I can't bear to se you make such a terrible mistake You mustn't get married, please!

"Jack," Eileen says. She looks a me. She was very sexy, seven year ago. "Jack," she says, "it's gettin late."

So we went to the window an got the license. We were marrie three weeks later.

"And?" the bartender said.

"Her mother," the young ma said, "left Canton, Ohio, the day af ter the wedding. She took an apart ment down the street."

"And?"

"This morning, I was sittin around the kitchen, studying up o this television repair course I'm tak ing, and Eileen was in the livin room, hanging up diapers, ver pregnant. The baby starts to bawl and I yell at her to shut him up. She comes in and says if I want some



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peace and quiet around the place she ought to get her nother over to help out. Over my dead body, I says, and guess what she says?"

"So drop dead?"

"Right. So drop dead, she's coming over tomorrow and she's staying two weeks. I get so mad I take that Elementary TV Repair Manual and throw it against the wall. *Wham!* I get a wet diaper in the kisser. So what else could I do? I get and march out of the house. I tell her I'm never coming back. And I mean it!"

"The fortune-teller said it was a wet shirt."

"Yeah, and that's the only thing he said wrong. I get out of the house and start walking the streets, and all of a sudden it comes back to me. The guy was right. The crystal ball was right. He knew it was going to happen!"

"What'd you do then?"

"I took a bus down to the City Hall district. I went to the Eat-Rite Luncheonette, and asked for Mr. Kessel. His partner says he's in the back room. I got to the back, and there he is, looking at this nutty old crystal ball. The minute he sees me he looks terrified. He grabs the ball and hugs it like a baby. 'It's all your fault!' I yell, and I let go with a right hook, bang, right on his nose. The ball flies out of his hands and does a crazy spin in the air. Then it drops on the tiled floor and goes *crash*. A million pieces. Then I walk out of there."

"And now what?"

"Now I'm going home," the young man said.

He slammed into the house with the same vehemence he had used to slam out of it. Only this time, he grabbed Eileen around the waist, and kissed her like a barbarian.

"Wow," she said.

"Wow is right," he said. "From now on, we make our own future. No lousy crystal ball is telling us what to do!"

"Crystal ball?" Then she remembered. "Oh, my gosh! I forgot all about him. The little guy at City Hall!"

"Yeah, and he won't be making any more predictions for a long time. I walked into his joint this afternoon, punched him in the nose, and smashed that damned Ball of the Centuries to pieces!"

"But that's terrible! He didn't mean any harm. You shouldn't have hurt the poor man. You better call him up and see if he's all right."

The young man looked shamefaced, and then nodded. He went out to the hallway phone, and placed the call.

"Hello," Mr. Kessel said weakly.

"Mr. Kessel? This is the guy that poked you. I'm calling to see if you're okay."

"My nose is bleeding."

"Gee, I'm sorry."

"Gee, I'm sorry."

"The Ball of the Centuries is busted."

"I'm sorry about that, too."

"It's all right," Kessel sighed. "It had to happen. To tell you the truth, I *knew* it was going to happen someday."

"You knew?"

"Sure. I saw it all in the Ball. I knew you were going to walk in

*(Continued on page 145)*



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# THE MENTAL ASSASSINS

## GREGG CONRAD

### Illustrated by H. W. Mac Cauley

*Of all the adventures he had faced in his day, none seemed so perilous as going into a man's dreams as a hired assassin!*

The place smelled of blood and the warm, suffocating odor of raw, living flesh even above the strong, disguising odor of disinfectant. The living corpse, for that was all it was in spite of the fact that it would still be living ten, twenty, perhaps fifty years hence, was a revolting caricature of a man, a fragment.

"That was Captain Walters. Sam Walters," the bug-eyed monster said politely. It was a doctor—bug-eyed because of the thick contact lenses, a monster because it could remain so calm and unaffected by the nearness of such an outrage against the senses. Otherwise it was Dr. Frank Bridewell, considered one of the greatest surgeons of his time. "Sam Walters was the only *revivable* taken from a wreck of a B36 passenger liner ten years ago. You probably don't remember it."

"It so happens I do," Arnold Taschereau said.

He forced himself to look at the fragment of a body, wincing when the flaccid lips pulled apart with a sound like that of a foot being pulled from soft swamp mud.

The living body had no legs or hips, those essentials of normal life being replaced by glass and metal tubes that vanished into the side of a box. The right arm and shoulder were gone, too. The stub of the left arm was held in a clamp, and was little more than skin over a bone fragment. The skin was an oily white. It would have been more in keeping with the underbelly of some foul thing in the stagnant waters of some hinterland bayou.

From the chest and neck other tubes emerged to go to the black box in straight lines like the neatly ordered wires inside a radio.

The eye sockets were empty tombs covered by lace edged curtains of skin. But even so, Arnold recognized the face of Captain Walters.

The forehead and the rest of the

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scalp were completely hidden within a close fitting, thick, cap-like affair that looked vaguely like a bulging stovepipe hat with its top pressed flat against the low ceiling.

Arnold studied this, then looked at Dr. Bridewell questioningly.

"That's the device that connects his mind with those of the others," the doctor said.

Looking into his lens-covered eyes, Arnold could see the curved reflection of the remains of Sam Walters in them. The doctor, mistaking the intent stare for admiration, smiled.

"It's one of the finest achievements of human engineering," he added. "Without it, Sam Walters would be just a blob of human flesh, kept alive because modern miracles of medicine and surgery made it possible, and rigid laws against mercy death would prevent his being allowed to die.

"With it—well, that's why you were called here in your professional capacity. With it, he lives in another world where his body is whole and strong. A world that has suddenly gone wrong though. That's why you were called. We hope you will consent to set it straight—if you can. We think you can—if it can be done at all—or we of course wouldn't have called you."

The doctor smiled as if he thought he had just paid a sincere compliment. Arnold Taschereau looked at the doctor doubtfully.

The smells, the entire room and everything in it, were beginning to sicken him.

"Do you mind if we go somewhere away from this to talk?" he asked.

"Of course. Of course," Dr. Bridewell said hastily. "I just thought—felt, rather—that it would be better for you to examine one of the physical units. I would have chosen another if I had thought—had any idea—that you could possibly have known Sam—Captain Walters—when he was alive—before he came here, I mean."

Arnold began to sense that underneath the doctor's calm exterior he was experiencing the same nausea. Maybe in spite of his appearance Dr. Bridewell had human thoughts and emotions.

In the hall, the doctor led the way back toward his office where Arnold had first met him, fifteen minutes before. They passed closed doors, spaced eight feet apart. The doors were paired on opposite sides of the hall, with a thick tube running straight across above each door and intersecting a long tube that ran down the middle of the hall.

"Behind each of these doors," Dr. Bridewell said calmly, "is a human unit. In the tubes overhead are the connecting circuits that make them all connected mentally. Each of these human units, is of course, what is left of some person who was practically decimated by some accident, so that there was no hope of salvaging it except in such a way that the brain would be kept alive. That is all they really are, actually:—living brains with enough of a body left to provide a stable metabolism."

They had come to the door of the doctor's office. He opened it and stood aside derentially. Arnold



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entered and took the same chair he had occupied before.

"Now that you have seen one of the—units, Mr. Taschereau," the doctor said, his voice more positive, "we can go on with an explanation of what it's all about."

"Please do," Arnold murmured, lighting a cigarette and inhaling deeply to clear the evil fumes from his lungs.

"Altogether there are—were—yes, I think it would be proper to say are—twenty physical units in the bank," Dr. Bridewell began. "The reason it's confusing will come out shortly. That is, I suppose it would be all right to explain that now, but the explanation will be clearer if I tell you a few other things first."

Arnold looked at the bulging eyes through their thick contact lenses and turned away to hide his exasperation.

"In order to explain what I would like to explain," the doctor went on, "I'll have to compare it with a dream. That is the type of existence these—units—lead. A dream life in which they are physically whole. The only difference is that with these, the other people in their dreams are just as real as they are, and remember it."

He straightened up and leaned back in his chair.

"It's what might be called a common dream—a joint dream, to be more exact," he said. "At least, that is the way we understand it. We aren't too sure of everything that takes place. We believe the surroundings in that dream world are built up by a sort of democratic process among the several individual minds, varied in details by the individual desires or will of each of the units. What they all agree should be there is very much there. What only one or two thinks should be in the mass dream is set to one side geographically, where the others can't see it or don't have to go unless they wish to."

"It begins to sound interesting," Arnold said. "A sort of democratic universe, so to speak. If the majority decide water is to be changed to wine, it is."

"Perhaps, in a manner of speaking," the doctor agreed doubtfully. "It would be more accurate to say that since the majority of the twenty units don't believe in miracles of that sort, their basic reality is pretty stable and very much similar to ours, so far as appearances are concerned."

"Fascinating," Arnold murmured. "I begin to see its possibilities. These human wrecks, made from normal human beings in the twinkling of an eye in some accident or other, unconscious, instants away from death except for the miracles of modern science, recover consciousness in this joint dream world they are joined onto by means of those hoods, and never know that their actual body is mutilated beyond all hope of redemption. They continue to be whole physically to themselves and their companions because they don't know they actually aren't. Right?"

"You have stated it better than I had hoped to," Dr. Bridewell said admiringly.

"I have here a list of the names of the twenty," the doctor continued,



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lifting a paper off the desk surface and holding it close to his face to read it. "Yes this is it. I want you to study that list so you'll know those people. It would be perhaps better if you concentrated on three or four and got very well acquainted with them before—rather than try to get acquainted with them all. You will get along better that way; but it's essential that you know the twenty and know them by sight because—"

"Just a minute," Arnold interrupted. "You made a slip then that sounded very much like you were expecting me—but of course not. That would be too utterly fantastic. Pardon the interruption, doctor, and go on."

"But that's exactly what we want you to do," Dr. Bridewell said. "We want you to enter that dream world and become one of them—the twenty-first."

"That's insane!" Arnold said, half rising. "You don't mean that you're mad enough to cut me up—"

"No, no," Dr. Bridewell said hastily. "Nothing like that. It would just be temporary, and when your work is done you would be disconnected, of course, and return to the land of the real no worse for your experience."

He paused, smiling ruefully.

"I hadn't planned on broaching the subject of your entering that dream world until later," he went on. "I realize that at this stage it has come as quite a shock."

"Quite is right," Arnold agreed, thinking of those soulless, groaning lips on what had once been Sam Walters.

"Let me tell you something of what it will be like for you if you consent to help us," the doctor said. "You will be in an ordinary hospital room we've prepared for you. You will be given two capsules of the drug that makes you unconscious of things around you. When it has had time to take effect—about fifteen minutes—the cap will be put over your head. Almost at once you will find yourself somewhere in the dream world of those others, but so real will it seem that you will be convinced it actually is real. However, anything you say in your dream, you will say here too. We will have someone with you, listening. The antidote will always be ready. It will only take a second to remove the cap and administer the antidote."

"You make it sound a little better," Arnold said. "But just what am I being asked to enter their dream world for? I gather that something's wrong, but surely I don't have the qualifications or traing to help them. I'm nothing but a rowdy adventurer who has managed to get a reputation. Because I was the first one to kill a Venusian Ank doesn't make me any braver than the dozens of men who have killed one since the. Because the Martian Canal Slurds singled me out to be their adopted pet doesn't mean I'm more appealing to a Slurd than any other human. Are you sure you haven't made a mistake?"

"We didn't pick on you because of those, ah, adventures that contributed to your fame," Dr. Bridewell said. He became silent. He seemed to be weighing something in his mind. "I may as well tell you," he went on slowly. "We needed a man



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with certain qualities, rather than abilities and qualifications. We asked certain government officials who they thought possessed those qualities of mind to the greatest degree. They recommended you to us."

"Oh, I see," Arnold said. "Go on."

"You see," Dr. Bridewell said. "A certain mental disease has taken root in this dream world. It is, actually, schizophrenia. There are twenty physical units. For a long time there were just twenty people in that dream world, each himself or herself, much as they were in real life before the accident that ruined their bodies. Now, suddenly, there are more than twenty people in that world."

"More? You mean that some of the minds have split to produce more than one individual?" Arnold asked.

"Yes," the doctor replied. "It's much more serious than it would be in a physically normal person. In a physically normal person the separate personality wouldn't find complete expression. It would have to compete with the normal personality for residence in the body and control over it. Those restrictions aren't present in the minds of these twenty units. As soon as the split occurs, the new personality has a complete and entirely independent body of its own. It's—its even impossible to tell which of the original personalities split!"

"It seems to me that should be fairly simple to find out," Arnold said. "All you have to do is cut each unit out, one at a time, and if two people vanish when a certain unit is cut out of the whole, then that is ths split personality."

"It isn't that simple," Dr. Bridewell said. "If we cut one of the units out of the circuit the mind of that person would immediately struggle up to conscious awareness of its real body. At all costs we must keep each of the twenty ignorant of his or her actual physical condition."

"Oh," Arnold said. "Then just what am I supposed to do?"

"We want you to; ah, kill those extra persons," the doctor said uncomfortably.

Arnold Taschereau's mouth dropped open. He stared unbelieving at the doctor. If the monstrous thing that had once been Sam Walters had outraged his senses, this calm though embarrassed statement he had made outraged the mind even more.

"There are only three," the doctor said, sensing Arnold's reaction. "I probably make it sound very coldblooded, but I'm sure you will find they need killing. They are utterly—evil."

"I see," Arnold said, recovering a little of his composure. "I also see why I was chosen. It was my shooting of the poor fellow who went space wacky and took over the controls of the Martian Queen and was going to dive the ship sunward. You believe I have the qualities necessary to enter this dream world and calmly shoot three strangers."

"You make it sound very bad," Dr. Bridewell said. "The way I—we, the other doctors and I—looked at it, we thought that in you we had found a man with the courage to save twenty lives in the only way we see possible.



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It takes courage to see that a man must die—and kill him."

"And how do you know these three can be killed?" Arnold took a different tack. "To kill a person you must destroy their physical body or damage it in such a way that the brain, the seat of consciousness, becomes inoperative. If I were to cut one of those dream bodies into little bits wouldn't it damage the physical seat of its existence?"

"That's possible, of course," Dr. Bridewell admitted. "We thought of that ourselves. We believe, however, that these three can be killed. They are, after all, the product of a split. And all the twenty-three dream persons are held rigidly by the common beliefs of the whole. For those three to be killed so the other twenty are convinced they are dead will build up a mass convicition against which the three will be helpless. We believe that they will then dissolve, as separate personalities, and return to their original state as frustrations and repressed desires in the minds of their owners. In other words, killing them, although it will seem like actual murder to you when you're in that dream world, will really be a sort of mental surgery on three sick minds."

The doctor smiled tiredly.

"Certainly," he added dryly. "In a mental hospital it isn't considered murder to effect a cure of a schizo patient and return him to society a normal person."

"You're right," Arnold chuckled. "I haven't heard of a person with a split personality getting two votes in the national election."

A new thought occurred to Arnold.

"Just how," he asked, "are you able to know all that goes on in this dream world? You said I will talk, in my sleep, so to speak. Do some of these others still do that?"

"No," Dr. Bridewell said. "Periodically one of us tunes in on the dream world. We do it without taking the drug, and keep the attitude in our minds that we are separate from it and have no existence in it. You might say that we enter that dream world as disembodied spirits, relatively speaking. We become aware of it and can see what goes on, but if they are aware of us at all, it's in the same way, relatively, that a so-called psychic is supposed to be aware of the presence of a spirit being."

"This gets more and more interesting," Arnold said. "I've been on Mars and Venus. Now it looks like I have a chance to travel into a different kind of world than even they are. I don't know whether I could bring myself to do what you want me to do, but I think I would enjoy getting acquainted with that world and its twenty or twenty-three citizens. By the way, what do they think of it? They were in one world. Suddenly they saw almost certain death bearing down on them. They wake up in a different world and can't get back. It seems to me I myself would come to the conclusion I was dead and in heaven or hell under those circumstances."

The doctor shook his head.

"I don't believe you would," he said. "The mind refuses to accept death on such flimsy evidence.



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Remember, they still have their bodies, so far as they can discern. If the theory of being dead occurred to them, they denied it. They actually believe that some unknown force sent them into this dream world and that it actually exists in the physcial sense, in another dimension, or perhaps in another part of our own universe. One of their main occupations is trying to find out where they are and how to return to the Earth!"

Arnold whistled softly.

"I'd like you to take this list," the doctor said, handing Arnold the sheet of paper he had been holding. "Get thoroughly acquainted with these people. We've collected files on each. Photographs of what they look like. We even have voice recordings of some of them so you can learn the sound of their voices. Page after page of notes on their lives before they were in the accidents that nearly killed them. It will all help you when you're thrown among them and have to deal with them as living individuals." The doctor stood up and held out his hand. "I'll expect to see you tomorrow afternoon."

Arnold folded the sheet of paper and shook hands with the doctor.

"I'll be here," he promised.

Arnold Taschereau left the hospital with the list of names and a heavy bundle of files under his arm, his thoughts seething with specualtion.

Uppermost in his mind was the question, "Who were the twenty?" He knew one already. Captain Sam Walters. He had known Sam back in the days when he himself had been a timeclock puncher for Trans Global. That was ten years ago, before a doting aunt had died and left him enough money to do anything he wished for the rest of his life. Since that time he hadn't seen Sam. His passion for adventure had kept him on the go. But he remembered Sam well—and Sam would remember him. Who were the others?

There were other questions crowding in, also. Dr. Bridewell's pat assertion that the miracles of modern surgery had saved the lives of these human wrecks, and the law prevented their being subjected to euthenasia was all right—on the surface. It fell down when you asked, "Where were these human hulks before the perfection of that hellish takeoff on the encephalograph?"

The answer, of course, was that they were allowed to die. A man with legs and hips torn off was allowed to die, before. But with the perfection of that dream circuit such a living wreck made an ideal subject for the grand experiment.

It was hellish, but it might be that it would prove to be a wonderful thing. It had its points. An accident victim unconscious, maimed beyond repair, could be shoved into such a dream world and continue to live normally, so far as he was aware.

The doctors might be coldblooded and unhuman according to some standards, but Arnold understood them. If they got the kinks ironed out, such as schizo developments and how to get rid of them, it eventually might be that partial cripples might voluntarily choose to become parts of such dream banks, or even a much larger composite



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bank with thousands of individuals all living normal lives until their shattered or disfigured bodies finally died.

No, Arnold concluded, he had no quarrel with the doctors. So he dismissed them from his mind. As he laid the files in the back seat of his car and climbed in, his thoughts switched back to the identity of the other nineteen members of the dream bank. Were they all chance accident cases? Who were they? Undoubtedly their identity wasn't known to the public. They had probably been listed as dead.

Arnold stepped on the gas, hurrying as fast as he dared, until he reached his hotel. In his room he spread the files out on his bed and started going into them.

Hours later he sat back in the room's one large, upholstered chair, three photographs in his hands. Out of the nineteen strangers in that group of twenty people, sixteen were people who had nothing in particular to attract him to them. The three were different.

First, there was Pretty Boy Jones. He had been one of the Solar System's greatest fighters. He'd won the heavyweight championship in boxing and held it for two years, then resigned it to enter wrestling. In that game he'd beaten some of the greatest wrestlers known. He had been wrestling when the roof fell in on a huge auditorium. A beam had pinned him down, nearly cutting him in two. That was when he had been taken to the hospital and placed in the "dream bank". Six feet four, weighing two hundred and forty-five, twenty-six years old, blond, well liked. Ring wise and a good personality, but not too intelligent in things outside the ring.

Second there was Granger Tyron, the movie actor. He had been a great actor of the type first born in Robert Mitchum back in the early days of pictures before space travel. At the height of his acting career he had been in a car accident that broke nearly every bone in his body and tore his body almost in two.

Granger's movie career had been phenomenal. Working in Hollywood as a landscape gardner's helper, he had been discovered by a director. In his first picture he had hit the public right between the eyes. Arnold recalled many of his pictures. "The Martian Plainsman", "Killer on the Spacelark", "The Outpost", and others.

Arnold laid those two aside. One picture was left in his hand. It was that of a young lady he had never seen nor heard of before. Her hair in the picture was a deep, lustrous brown. Her eyes were large and a clear blue. The files gave the information that her name was Mona West, and that she had written a best seller novel a year before her accident that had made her a fitting subject for the dream bank. Five feet six, twenty-three years of age, there was nothing spectacular about her life other than her having written a successful novel called "The Green Pastures of Space".

Yet there was something about her that had drawn Arnold to her the moment his eyes came to rest on her face smiling at him from the picture. If he had seen her in life he knew in



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his inner thoughts that he would have stopped her and made her acquaintance or killed himself trying.

Four people stood out among the twenty. Captain Sam Walters, the airplane pilot he had known personally: Pretty Boy Jones, the great fighter, whom he had seen in the ring many times: Granger Tyron, the great actor: and last, Mona West.

Until he saw her picture he still held doubts as to whether he would consent to enter the combined dream of the twenty people.

But now—he laid her picture on the coffee table where he could see it and stood up, looking down at it. His lips compressed in decision. He would enter that dream of people for whom there was nothing left but a dream—and straighten it out for them.

"Remember, Mr. Taschereau," Dr. Bridewell said solemnly, "if, at any time, you want to escape from the dream, say so in a clear voice, willing us to hear. That will cause you to speak aloud physically. There will always be someone here to hear you, every minute of the day or night. We'll bring you out of it as quickly as it's possible."

"And never forget," one of the nurses said. "That it's nothing but a dream. The joint dream of twenty normal people and three others."

Arnold lay back on the special cot devised for the experiment and relaxed. He was dressed only in a hospital gown, sox, and slippers.

The internes strapped him down firmly but comfortably. A nurse pushed up the sleeve of his left arm and cleaned an area of skin with cotton and alcohol.

He watched while Dr. Bridewell stabbed a hypo needle deep into the flesh and slowly pushed down on the plunger, driving the pale yellow fluid down.

"Close your eyes," the doctor said.

Arnold looked around at the ring of faces hovering over him. They were beginning to seem unreal, far away. He sighed and closed his eyes, blotting their faces from view.

A humming sound became audible. Would that be the top hat affair over his head? No, that hadn't been put on yet. The humming was growing louder. There was a feeling of movement. It became a rapid slipping glide. But that was wrong. It was only the internes moving his cot over to where they could make it telescope into a sort of chair.

Just a dream, Arnold said drowsily. "No matter how real, just a—DREEEE . . ."

The humming became a roar. It would die down, then come back. It was almost like the roar of a gale. And it was cold.

Something soft and wet was landing against Arnold's face. It would land and cling, then trickle down. He wondered if the nurse was washing his face. Still, it was too cold for that. More like snow.

He opened his eyes. It was snow. Large, wet flakes. A gust of wind picked up a lot of it and blew it against him. He stumbled and slipped to one hand and his knees. It was only four or five inches of snow, but the way it was coming down it



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would be a foot deep in another hour.

He climbed to his feet again and struggled on, the wind blowing against him. The roaring came from dimly seen trees around him. The snow was so thick that it was impossible to see very far.

It was getting colder. Arnold wished he had something warmer than the hospital robe on, then felt foolish, because he knew he had on a heavy coat, and was wearing heavy boots over his shoes.

What had made him think he was wearing a hospital robe? Crazy. It was dangerous to get crazy thoughts when you were out alone like this. That's why none of the others had wanted to come with him.

You didn't die, of course. No one ever died. But you could freeze, and then you might lay there forever, unable to move, going slowly insane with your own thoughts.

Of course, there was a way to escape. What was it? He stumbled slowly through the snow trying to remember. The wind was piling up drifts that were hard to push through. If he could only remember. But even if he did, where would he escape to? There wasn't any place but *there*. That's where he was headed. He'd just have to keep on.

But what if he was wandering around in circles? –The snow obliterated his tracks almost as soon as he made them. He could be wandering around in a small circle without going anywhere. And the snow was getting hard to push through. It wouldn't stay soft enough. It was getting soggy and sticky like slush.

The wind was a freezing blast now. It was forming a crust on the snow. That was ususual, to say the least. Suppose it froze while he was standing knee deep in a drift. He would be held solid and never get away.

Unless he could remember what to do.

What good would that do? It would only take him back where he had been, wherever that was. He'd have it all to do over again. There must be some other way.

Arnold became aware that he had stopped walking for a minute. He tried to take a step. He was frozen fast—just as he had feared he would be. That was crazy, thinking he had frozen fast just because he had feared he might be.

There was nothing that could be done unless he could remember something he was supposed to know. He could pray. That was crazy too. To pray. But nobody was around to hear. He could pray and nobody would know.

"I'm stuck fast in the ice," he said out loud. As he said it he wondered why it was so important to speak slowly and distinctly when praying. "Take me out of this," he added, feeling foolish.

He waited. Nothing happened. He knew nothing would happen. It was silly to expect it. It was better than just doing nothing though.

The cold was creeping through his clothing. His legs were numb. Maybe he could die after all from freezing. Of course! What had ever made him



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think he couldn't die? It was a trap. If he hadn't thought he couldn't die he would have struggled harder. It was too late for that. He was stuck in the snowdrift.

The numbness was spreading all through his body. It was even affecting his eyes. The snow was wavering strangely. He closed his eyes tight to blot out the scene.

He felt warmer. That was a symptom of freezing, to feel warm. When the circulation stopped you felt warm where it stopped.

He opened his eyes.

"What happened?" Dr. Bridewell said, concern showing on his features.

Arnold blinked into the thick contact lenses of the doctor's eyes and saw the distorted reflection of the bloated high hat over his head. Full recollection came to him.

"They gave me a cold reception," he said dryly. He went on to describe what had happened.

"That's bad," Dr. Bridwell said. "We should have told you something about what you would find over there. We knew, of course, about the snow. They're all inside a dome. I don't know how they conjured it up, but its psychological basis is clear. It makes their world simple, with clearly marked boundaries. Outside the dome is nothing but eternal snowstorm."

"Why couldn't I have waked up inside the dome then?" Arnold asked, "I certainly expected to wake up with people around me!"

"It's possible that the three you're after sensed your presence and what you intend to do, and tried to prevent it by making you 'arrive' out in the snow," Dr. Bridewell said slowly. "If that's so, then it's going to be hard for you to break through into the dream. More than likely you will wake up right where you were, stuck in the snow, if you go back now."

"Why couldn't I remember anything about here?" Arnold asked. "I can remember everything in the dream vividly, but while I was dreaming it I couldn't even remember I was supposed to speak out loud to get out. I had a silly impulse to pray. I felt I had to pray out loud."

"That was your subconscious memory telling you what to do," Dr. Bridewell explained. "Most people don't realize they're dreaming while they're dreaming. It's rare to know that it's a dream."

"I understand that," Arnold said. "But in it I had been somewhere. It seemed like I belonged in that world, and had been in the dome. You had never told me about the dome, but in the dream I knew about it."

"Part of that was the telepathy of the mass dream," Dr. Bridewell explained. "Part of it was your own unconscious attempt to rationalize. In your mind you knew that you had existed a long time. Therefore you denied that you had just materialized in the snowstorm by feeling that you had been someplace and was trying to get back."

"I'm beginning to think I won't like it," Arnold said. "I had sort of understood that I would go into this with my full senses about me. I was telling myself that I would have to be very careful not to let the others know it was just a dream they were living. Now I'm beginning to think



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when I go back, if I do, I won't be able to remember myself that it's only a dream!"

Dr. Bridewell looked keenly at Arnold. He hesitated before speaking.

"Perhaps you'd better wait before going back," he said. "We can try it again tomorrow—if you still would like to try. In fact, a night of normal sleep might help you regain your confidence and think of ways to get around the snowstorm."

"I think I would like to think it over some more," Arnold said. "These straps make me feel hemmed in."

Dr. Bridewell hastily freed Arnold and stood back while Arnold stood up and took a few steps around the room. The nurse walked beside him ready to catch him if he stumbled.

"Come back tomorrow," Dr. Bridewell said tonelessly.

"Sure," Arnold said. "Where's my clothes?"

The nurse left the room and returned at once with his clothes.

"I'll call the hospital garage to bring your car to the front entrance, Dr. Bridewell said. He turned, and left the room. The nurse followed him.

Frowning at the floor, Arnold dressed hastily. He left the hospital gown on the cot where it was telescoped up like an upholstered chair.

A feeling of anger was growing in him. Anger against the doctor for some unaccountable reason. Anger against the three schizoid beings in that dream for getting him stuck by such a simple device as a snowbank. But mostly anger against himself, because he felt he was letting someone down, whether the doctor or those twenty in the dream.

With his hand on the knob, ready to open the door, he suddenly realized he had no intention of returning. He'd had enough.

Out in the hall he looked about uneasily for the doctor or the nurse. No one was in sight. He went down the hall past the doors that were close together, with the straight tubes up near the ceiling that contained the wires that hooked up the minds of the twenty hopeless cripples so they could lead a normal life in a dream world of their joint creation.

He walked past those doors quickly, feeling like a deserter. He paused at Dr. Bridewell's office door, then hurried on. If he faced the doctor he would give away the fact that this was goodbye. He'd drop the hospital a line from the hotel, then take the next spaceship to Mars or Venus and forget about it all.

Outside he tripped down the stone steps. His car was waiting at the entrance, its motor running. He climbed in and drove down the driveway to the highway.

At the hotel he went straight to his room. There he sat down and wrote his letter to Dr. Bridewell. After he had finished it, he remembered the files. They were laying on the table. He added a postscript saying he was returning them by messenger.

He read the letter over, sealed it in a hotel envelope, and called downstairs for a messenger. He paced the room smoking a cigarette until the messenger boy arrived. He



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gave him the file envelopes and the letter and paid him.

After the messenger boy had gone he felt better. It was over. Definitely over. He could forget about the whole experience now.

"Oh yes," he muttered. "Got to get a reservation on the plane to New Mexico to the spaceport." He phoned and found he could catch the nine o'clock plane in the morning.

"That leaves an evening to kill," he muttered, hanging up. He looked at his watch. It was almost six o'clock. "Might as well have something to eat," he added.

He frowned at himself in the mirror while he ran the electric shaver lightly over his face. He didn't bother to change his clothes.

Down in the lobby he hesitated between the cocktail lounge and the dining room. He decided to have a Martini before eating.

The cocktail lounge was nearly empty. There was a party of six at one table. Half a dozen men distributed along the bar. A man was at the electric organ. The sign beside the organ said his name was Albert Rossini. The music was soothing.

Arnold sat behind a three-cornered table in one corner. After a while the girl took his order. When she came back with his Martini, the way the subdued light struck her, she reminded him of someone.

After she left he sipped at his Martini trying to remember who she reminded him of. It came to him. She looked like the picture of one of those girls in that dreamworld. He finished his Martini in a gulp and set the glass on the table with a thump.

The girl looked his way at the sound. He nodded. She brought him another Martini.

"Pretty early in the evening to drink them that fast," she said, smiling.

"You gave me an idea," Arnold said.

"What idea?" the girl asked.

"Not what you think," Arnold said. "To spend the evening drinking." He paid for the drink and gave the girl a dollar tip. She eyed the tip thoughtfully.

"I wasn't thinking what you thought I was thinking," she said. "But you gave me an idea too."

"What idea?" Arnold asked, running the tip of a finger around the lip of the glass.

He was clumsy. He tipped the glass over. The drink spilled in his lap.

"Oh!" the girl said. She ran and brought a towel. "What's your room number?" she asked while he mopped at his clothing. When he looked up at her she added, "I'll send a boy up to bring you down some clothes. You can change in the men's room, and he'll take this suit to the valet shop."

"Oh," Arnold grunted.

"You have the wrong idea about me," the girl said. "I get off at seven. I'm afraid I'll have to let you take me out just to prove to you I'm not that kind of a girl."

"My room's seventeen fifty-three," Arnold said. "I'll have another Martini while I'm waiting."

The girl went out into the lobby. She came back and brought him a Martini.

"On me," she said when he tried to



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pay for it. He frowned at her as she walked away.

"Which one of those girls in the dream does she remind me of?" he wondered. The question made him think. He hadn't asked her her name.

The boy appeared through the lobby doors with his clothes. He rose and followed the boy to the men's room and changed his clothes. He gave the boy a dollar tip and went back to his table.

"What's your name?" he asked the girl when she came with another Martini.

"Mary Rutherford," she said. She gave him a nervous smile.

"Mary Rutherford," he said reflectively. "Mona. That's it. Mona West. Ever hear of her?"

"No-o," Mary said. "Wasn't she the author of a book? I seem to remember reading that she was killed in an accident a couple of years ago. I may have read her book."

"That's her," Arnold answered. "My name's Arnold Taschereau."

"I'll see you at seven thirty," Mary said, turning away. She turned back. "In the lobby." Arnold smiled at her departing back. It was a nice back.

"So you see," Arnold said bitterly. "I'm running out on the doc."

It was two in the morning. He and Mary were sitting at a corner table in the fifth or the tenth nightclub. It had taken seven more Martinis after she had joined him in the lobby before he started to unburden himself. It had taken Mary three of them to start believing what he said might be true. After the fourth she had started studying Arnold seriously. Even pityingly.

Now she shoved back her fifth drink with determination in her movements.

"You know," she said. "I was starting to believe you for a while. But I can see it now. You're just another guy from Dubuque or Albany or Chicago who likes to pretend he is somebody when he's away from the wife. You must be a writer or something to have such an imagination. So you're the explorer, Arnold Taschereau! I've heard of him. The natural type to pretend to be. I doubt if he looks anything like you, though, Arnold—or whatever your name is."

"But it is my name," Arnold protested, bewildered by this line of attack.

"O. K.," Mary said with studied unbelief. "But why this line about exploring in a dream? Does your imagination always run that way when you get about three too many? Why couldn't you have just been content to tell me you are just back from a secret exploration trip to Saturn or someplace?"

"I don't blame you," Arnold said bitterly. "But I guess it's better to have you think I'm a liar than a coward."

"Maybe I think you're both," Mary said coldly. She felt the short hairs at the nape of her neck start to rise as she saw him change uniformly from being drunk to being cold sober in a space of half a minute. In that thirty seconds she realized beyond any doubt that Arnold had told nothing but the truth—could tell nothing but what he thought was the



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truth. But she forced herself not to let him know.

"Mary," he said. His tone was cool, determined. It hadn't been loud, yet people at other tables turned to look at him. "You've just talked yourself into something you can't talk yourself out of. I'm taking you out to the hospital and make the doc show you those things that were once alive."

Mary picked up her untouched fifth Martini and pretended to sip it in order to conceal her expression until she could quiet her heart beat.

"That would only show me you aren't a liar," she said finally. "I think I'll go home. You stay here. You can find another girl. I know my way home."

She slipped away from his clutching hand and went toward the exit. In the mirror she saw him glare at her, then rise to follow. She frowned and hesitated when she saw the bouncer lay his hand on Arnold's shoulder. This was one of the few places where a girl could get rid of an unwelcome escort. The bouncers were obliging. They would stop the guy and argue with him until she could get away. But she didn't want that this time. She wanted Arnold to follow, catch up with her.

Outside there was a lone taxi waiting. She knew the driver by sight. She looked back at the club entrance. Arnold wasn't in sight. She stuck her head in the window of ths cab.

"Drive around the block and come back," she said. "If I'm still alone go around again."

"You can't catch me said the little girl," the driver said, grinning. He slipped the clutch and drove away.

Mary stood at the curb and craned her neck to see if a taxi was coming. She was still doing that when Arnold came out of the club blowing on his knuckles. She pretended to be angry and surprised when he stopped beside her.

The cab swung around the corner and came toward them slowly, pulling toward the curb. When it stopped, Mary opened the door and got in, hastily closing the door after her. Arnold opened it to climb in beside her.

"Will you please get out?" Mary said icily.

"No," Arnold said. "Driver, take us to the Briant Hospital."

"Driver," Mary said. "Will you please get rid of this man. I had the cab first."

The driver turned his head and looked at Arnold.

"Sorry, lady," he said. "I don't get paid for work like that. I can stop when I see a cop if you want."

"Please do," Mary said.

Arnold leaned forward, his arm over the driver's seat. A ten dollar bill slipped from his fingers.

"Briant Hospital," he said. "And forget about the cops."

Suddenly the cab door opened. Arnold glanced up quickly to see who it was. It was the bouncer.

"You have a nice solid right," the bouncer said, sliding into the seat beside Arnold. As he said it he rubbed the jutting tip of his jaw tenderly.

"What are you doing here?" Arnold asked coldly. "Don't you have a job to hold down? Or did you jest get off work?"



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"Got fired," the bouncer said sadly. "And it's your fault. You shouldn't have hit me like that. You should have known it would get me fired."

"Sorry," Arnold said contritely. "I didn't think. But I couldn't figure why you were mixing in, and I was afraid Mary would get away."

The bouncer seemed to notice Mary for the first time.

"Hi, kid," he said.

"You know her?" Arnold asked. When the bouncer shrugged Arnold said. "What's your name?"

"You can call me Joe," the bouncer replied. "I'll answer to it. What's yours?"

"Arnold Taschereau," Arnold answered in a casual manner.

Joe stuck out his hand. Arnold took it. They started to shake hands.

Joe's left only travelled ten inches. Joe winced in pain as Arnold's belt buckle bit into the backs of his fingers.

Arnold doubled up. He had been caught completely by surprise. The blow to the solar plexus paralyzed him, his breathing, his thoughts, his muscles.

He wasn't immediately aware of being dragged out of the cab. It surprised him to be on the sidewalk. He got to his hands and knees and rose unsteadily, gasping for breath.

Joe's fist landed on his forehead like a mallet. He staggered back and sat down. There was a fleeting glimpse of Mary's white face pressed to the window of the cab as it pulled away from the curb. Then Joe's big fist was gripping his shirt front, lifting him up.

Another blow would come in a second. With half glazed eyes he saw Joe's immense figure drift down past his eyes like a slow elevator. He waited until he was sure his fist would land right, and struck out with everything in him.

There was a grunt, half of surprise and half of pain. The fist let go of his shirt.

Arnold danced back out of range and went into an act of seeming half out on his feet. His thoughts were clearing. Strength was flowing back into his paralyzed arms and shoulders. If he could keep out of the bouncer's way another few seconds he would be all right again.

Joe watched him, rubbing the spot where Arnold had hit him.

"I think I'm going to like you, Arnold," he said. He came forward lightly on his feet, wary and suspicious of Arnold's apparent weakness.

His left shot out. In a split second Arnold decided it was a feint and would be followed by a lethal right. He ducked into the feinting fist and felt the right buzz past his ear as his own right sunk deeply into Joe's stomach.

Joe's arms dropped momentarily. Arnold took advantage of it. He watched, fascinated, as his left, seemingly separate from him, rose in slow motion and connected with Joe's immobile chin.

For the second time in perhaps ten minutes the bouncer fell back, out before he lit.

Arnold looked around. The taxi with Mary was gone. He took out a cigarette and lit it with a shaking hand. There was nothing to do but wait for Joe to wake up. Joe had half



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admitted knowing Mary. He might know where she lived—and Arnold knew now that he could lick the heavier man any time he chose to. He sensed Joe's eyes on him from where he lay on the sidewalk.

"Sorry, Joe," he said, smiling mirthlessly.

Joe's hand went up to his chin. A finger touched it gently.

"That's quite all right, Arnold," Joe said politely. "I had to learn, I guess."

Arnold took out his pack and offered Joe a cigarette. Joe took it. He looked up at Arnold's face while Arnold held his lighter to the cigarette.

When Arnold stood back he rose slowly to his feet.

"Where does Mary live?" Arnold asked.

"How should I know?" Joe said. "I've seen her in the club a few times, of course; but that's all." He looked keenly at Arnold. "You want to get acquainted with her, don't you?" he said.

"It's your fault I didn't," Arnold pointed out. "It sort of leaves it up to you to find her for me again doesn't it?"

"We have a mutual responsibility toward each other," Joe said, his careful, cultivated diction sounding out of place coming from his fighter's face. "You lost me my job, you know."

"Help me find Mary and I'll get you another job," Arnold promised. "And don't tell her, but I'm serious about her. I just met her this evening, but I don't want to lose her."

"I know that taxi driver," Joe said. "We could wait until he gets back and ask him where he took her."

"That's our best bet," Arnold agreed. "Want a drink with me while we wait?"

"I don't drink," Joe said. "Anyway, it'd be better to wait out here. This is his stand, but sometimes somebody's waiting for him when he drives up. We might just miss him."

It was twenty minutes before the cab came back. When it came to a stop at the curb Joe bent down and stuck his head in the driver's window.

"My pal here, Arnold, would like to know where that girl went," he said. "As a favor to me, would you take him there?"

"Why not?" the driver grinned. "He gave me a ten spot."

"Fine," Joe said.

He opened the back door of the cab and climbed in. Arnold ducked down to follow him into the cab. Joe's foot planted itself against his neck. Suddenly he was flying backwards across the sidewalk.

He came to rest against the door of the nightclub. Before he could rise, the cab was speeding down the street, its tail lights winking as it braked for a sharp turn at the corner.

His eyes darted the other way. Another cab was coming. He jumped up and ran into the street to flag it down.

"Follow that cab that's going around the corner," he ordered, climbing in. In the cab he took out another ten dollar bill and shoved it in the driver's hand. "Get going."

He settled back, cursing his stupidity at having trusted Joe. He



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wouldn't make the same mistake again!

The cab Joe was in stayed a block to two blocks ahead. Arnold's driver seemed to know the art of following another car. He clung to it like a bloodhound.

In the back seat Arnold was trying to puzzle things out. That Joe was no ordinary bouncer he was now positive. No man with the ability to deal off the top and the bottom of the deck so casually as Joe had done it would be just a bouncer. Bouncers were generally ex-fighters who had begun to lose too many fights in the ring, and turned to steadier work in their own line.

Some wrestlers were good at acting friendly while pulling dirty deals. Joe had the build to be a wrestler.

But if Joe were a pro turned bouncer he wouldn't have been such a sucker for a left to the jaw. There was no question the man knew the ins and outs of fighting, but not as an ex-pro.

Or was it, Arnold asked himself, that he was so keyed up that his reflexes were superfast? That might be it.

"I could catch him," the driver said, half turning his head.

"Maybe later," Arnold said. "I'd like to wait until he stops and see where he's going."

"You a cop?" the driver asked conversationally.

"No," Arnold said. "The guy in that cab knocked me down. I want to ask him what for."

"Know him?" the driver asked.

"He said his name is Joe," Arnold said. "He was the bouncer at that club where you picked me up."

"Sure, I know him," the driver said. "What'd he knock you down for?"

"That's what I want to find out," Arnold said bitterly. "Do you know where he's headed? Do you know where he lives?"

"I know where he's going, if it's Joe," the driver said. "But Joe's a friend of mine. I think you'd better tell me more before we go any further."

He pulled over to the curb and braked to a quick stop.

"I was with a girl named Mary," Arnold said hastily. "It was in that club."

"Mary?" the driver said. "Work over at the hotel in the cocktail lounge?"

"Yes," Arnold said.

"I know her too," the driver said. "No wonder Joe knocked you down. He had a crush on Mary."

"Oh!" Arnold said. "That explains a lot! Do you know where Mary lives? If you do, never mind about Joe."

"Yeah," The driver said. "But at four in the morning? Why don't you wait and see her at work tomorrow? I'll take you to the hotel. You get some sleep. Tomorrow afternoon drop down to the cocktail lounge and she'll be there."

Arnold hesitated, then agreed. The driver started the cab. A few minutes later he stopped at the hotel. Arnold got out and started to pay him, then remembered the ten dollar bill.

"Keep the change," he said.

"Thanks," the driver said.

Arnold watched him drive away.



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The cab was a block away when Arnold began to wonder how the driver had known he was staying at the hotel. He looked around for another cab to follow and find out. There was none in sight, so he shrugged and went into the hotel and up to his room.

He was undressed when the memory struck him that he had a reservation on the nine o'clock plane to New Mexico. He glanced at his watch. It was four-twenty.

He lit a cigarette, put on his bathrobe, and sat down to think things out.

There was, first of all, the job the doctor had asked him to do. It wasn't exactly right to run out on that; but on the other hand they could and would get someone else to do it. That was sure. They probably had already. Almost certainly they had considered the possibility of him either turning the thing down in the first place, or not succeeding; and had one or two other prospects on their list of "trouble-shooters."

It wasn't really a cowardly act to run out, even though Mary had put it on that basis. And even her putting it on that basis didn't bother him too much except that for some reason it had gotten under his skin to have her say it. Or was it as impersonal as that? Had he fallen for Mary?

Perhaps. At least enough so that he knew he couldn't just catch the plane in the morning and go out of her life, never to see her again.

In fact, he now realized, he would go back into that dream world and try to get through the snowstorm and straighten out the dream lives of those twenty people if by doing so Mary would be friendly to him.

But why hadn't she come back? Why had she run away when he was dragged out of the cab by Joe? Did she know Joe had a crush on her? Was she afraid of him?

There was a score to settle with Joe, too. Arnold felt the tender spot over his solar plexus where Joe's fist had sunk in. There was a purple bruise there the size of his belt buckle.

If he were to catch that plane Mary would believe he had also run from Joe. Joe would probably never confess that Arnold had risen from the sidewalk where he had been lying in agony when Mary sped away in the cab, and had whipped him.

"Yah," Joe would say disgustedly to Mary. "The yellow coward lay there pleading with me to lay off. I let him go and he ran down the street as fast as he could go."

Arnold gritted his teeth in frustrated rage at the mental picture. Life would be intolerable wherever he went, with the knowledge that Mary was convinced he was a coward.

So there was no question about it. He would stay and see things out. He would make Joe sorry he had ever laid a finger on him. He would show Mary or make Joe admit to Mary that he could lick him any time he chose. He would go back into the dream world to further convince Mary he was no coward.

After that? Arnold frowned. There was something not quite appealing



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to being serious about a girl you had had to prove to that you weren't a coward. It was starting off on the wrong foot, really.

Arnold awoke with a start. He had fallen asleep in the chair. His cigarette had fallen to the rug and gone out without doing any damage. He glanced at his watch. It was seven-thirty.

His whole body tingled with exhaustion as he stumbled to bed. He closed his eyes. The vision of Dr. Bridewell rose in front of him, his thick contact lenses gleaming reproachfully at him. But Dr. Bridewell was the taxi driver that had brought him to the hotel, and he didn't have contact lenses at all. It was just the way the light shone on them.

An insistent ringing broke through Arnold's consciousness. He opened his eyes. It was the telephone. He reached out and answered it.

"Good morning, Mr. Taschereau," the operator's voice sounded. "The airport just called. They said you have a reservation on the nine o'clock plane to New Mexico."

"Tell them to cancel it," Arnold said. He dropped the receiver and turned over, sound asleep.

He awoke to a splitting headache. His watch said two-thirty. He climbed out of bed carefully, his muscles aching during the lulls in his headache. A hot shower and a stiff bromo made him feel better.

In the lobby he peeked into the cocktail bar. Mary wasn't there yet. In the hotel dining room the waiter was inclined to argue about serving breakfast in the middle of the afternoon. He and Arnold compromised on tomato juice, toast and coffee. When that was over it was almost four o'clock.

Arnold peeked into the cocktail bar again. Mary still wasn't there. He went in anyway. There were people sitting here and there with drinks in front of them.

He went up to the bar. The bartender was dawdling. After five intolerable minutes he deigned to notice Arnold and came over.

"When does Mary come to work?" Arnold asked.

"One o'clock," the bartender said. "She didn't show up today."

"Damn!" Arnold exclaimed. "Where does she live?"

The bartender eyed him suspiciously. Arnold sighed and took out a five dollar bill.

The place was a four story walkup apartment building. There were serveral in the block, differing only in the number painted in worn gilt on the entrance.

Arnold climbed the stairs to the third floor and knocked on the door. It was opened by a gum-chewing girl, blonde, about thirty.

"Mary didn't come home last night," she said in answer to Arnold's question. "I'm worried, too. It's the first time she never came home."

"Never came home?" Arnold echoed.

The girl eyed him owlishly and stepped back invitingly. Arnold went in. She closed the door.

"Yes," the girl said. "I'm terribly worried." She took a worn



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handkerchief from a small dress pocket and started to cry. She moved a step toward Arnold, her shoulders and head bent, her hand holding the handkerchief to her eyes.

Arnold looked around for a place to back up. It was too late. The blonde head was against his chest.

"There, there," he said paternally, putting his arms awkwardly around her shoulders. There were flakes of dandruff on the thin edges of her scalp.

She crept closer in a pathetic way. Her hands left her eyes and clutched at his coat lapels. Arnold patted her shoulder blades comfortingly. Seemingly unconsciously her arms crept around him. Her shoulders were shaking gently as she appeared to cry.

"What do you suppose could have happened to her?" she asked. She raised her head and drew her shoulders back, pressing against him, looking into his eyes with questioning innocence. Her eyes were quite dry.

A smile quirked Arnold's lips. He gently disengaged her and, walking over to a chair, sat down.

She studied him, her jaw working slowly on the gum. Arnold read in her expression that she had decided he was just dumb.

"Look," he said. "Do you know a guy named Joe that's a bouncer at some nightclub?"

"Joe? Joe?" She shook her head, but Arnold saw that she was pretending.

"I think Joe has her," Arnold said, not knowing whether it was a lie or not. "I was with Mary last night. Joe showed up and picked a fight with me. I think afterward he must have made Mary go with him."

He watched the effect of this on the blonde. It's implication was that Joe had knocked him out and when he came to Joe and Mary were gone.

"Maybe Mary has his address somewhere in her things," she said. "I'll go look. You wait here."

She went into another room. Arnold waited, feeling frustrated and completely ineffectual. Nothing could have happened to Mary. She had gone off in the cab while he was fighting with Joe. The cab had come back. The driver hadn't acted like anything had happened to her. Where had she gone? Obviously not here where she lived. But wherever it had been, she had gone willingly. Her not showing up for work probably meant she had chosen to lose a day's pay rather than see him again. Maybe that's all her not coming home amounted to. She had known he could find out some way where she lived, and had stayed at some other girlfriend's house.

It was the element of doubt that was keeping him from forgetting the whole thing, Arnold knew. The element of doubt backed by Joe's too expert dirty fighting, and that second cab driver's too sure knowledge of things he had no way of knowing. Those things were just enough to make Arnold unable to accept the brushoff, as it seemed on the surface, until he had seen Mary and learned from her that that was what it was intended to be.

The blonde came back into the room. She was carrying an envelope and a sheet of stationery. Her eyes were on it as if she were reading it.



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"I just found this on Mary's dresser," she said absently. "I don't know when she left it there. It's to me."

She finished reading it and handed it to Arnold without speaking. He took it and read it.

"Dear Joan," it read. "I didn't want to wake you when I came in. I'm taking a trip to Venus and have to catch the nine o'clock plane. Just taking a few things with me. Take care of everything while I'm gone." It was signed, "Mary".

"She must have come home after all," the blonde said. "I guess I was asleep when she was here."

"Thanks for letting me read that, Joan," Arnold said.

He gave it back to her and left, running down the stairs to the waiting cab. Back at the hotel he told the desk clerk to get him a seat on the next plane to New Mexico, and with a bellhop in tow went up to his room to check out.

Questions were rushing through his mind in a torrent. Why had Mary taken the nine o'clock plane? Had she learned he had a seat on it? He had probably told her so and forgotten about it. Of course he had! He remembered now. When he told her he was running out on the doctor he had said he had a seat on the nine o'clock plane.

That meant she had taken that plane to follow him! Suddenly he was happy. Everything had changed. Rather than running out on him, giving him the brushoff, she had gone after him. How could she have learned that he would cancel his seat and stay to look for her!

The phone rang. It was the room clerk saying that the next plane would leave in half an hour. He could just make it. The bellhop helped him with his travel bags.

In the lobby a precious five minutes was wasted paying his bill. The bellhop had his bags in the cab, waiting, when he reached the sidewalk.

The cab driver broke a few laws. At the airport they were waiting to rush him through. He paid for the ticket and climbed the ramp to the plane. A porter was rushing his bags to the cargo loading hatch. The battery truck was waiting under a wing to get the motors started.

The stewardess conducted him to a window seat, went back down the aisle. The door closed. The plane was sealed. One of the motors turned over, coughed, and began to roar fitfully. Another and another, until all four motors were turning over. Outside, the traffic officer waved his arms, signalling. The plane moved out into the field.

Arnold looked around inside the plane. All the seats seemed to be full. It was the usual assortment of strange faces. People starting a vacation or business trip. Nine out of ten were on their way to the Moon or Mars or Venus. None of the faces were familiar.

Arnold fastened his seat belt. It didn't go right. He looked closely at the strap buckle. It was bent a little out of line. With a little coaxing the strap went in. Just as he was about to look up again he noticed a stain on his finger.

It was an ink stain.

The roar of the four motors, muted by the soundproof walls of the plane,



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increased in pitch. The paved strip outside began to move backwards. It moved with increasing speed, then dropped down. The plane was in the air.

Arnold's eyes came back to the ink stain. They left it and looked out the window at the receding landscape below. This plane was nonstop to the spaceport.

An urge rose in him to run to the emergency door and leap out. If there had been chutes on passenger planes he might have used one to leave and plane and get back to the city; but no plane carried chutes.

Frustration. It rose in his mind again, possessed him like a cloying spirit.

That note had been so pat. Its words had fitted into his wishes like a key fitting the lock it was made for.

But if Mary had written it in the small hours of the morning, he couldn't have smeared his finger with the ink from it in the afternoon.

Either Joan had written it herself while she was in that other room, or Mary had been hiding in there and had written it to get him out of town. It couldn't have been Joan unless someone had told her that he had had a seat reservation on the nine o'clock plane.

It must have been Mary. Arnold's thoughts became bitter. Mary had been in that other room all the time he was there. She didn't want him around. She was so anxious to get rid of him that she was willing to send him on a useless chase to New Mexico.

She had written the note and had Joan take it out to him. And it had worked.

Too bad she hadn't blotted it more carefully. Then he might have chased all the way to Venus looking for her.

Remorselessly the lonely years settled around him. The years during which he had travelled from place to place, courting death in a dozen different guises, always subconsciously searching. Searching for—Mary.

Yes. It had always been a search for Mary. He hadn't known what she would look like, or where or when he would first meet her. In his innermost thoughts he had had the naive belief that the fitness of things would ordain that when he found her she would have been looking all her life for him.

Instead, she had hidden behind a closed door in another room, and written a "note" designed to drive him far away—get rid of him. She had been there. She could have stepped out through the door. She could have stood there and said, "Hello, Arnold." But she hadn't.

Arnold rose and walked down the aisle to the tail of the plane. In the wash room he washed the ink stain off his finger. He washed his hands clean.

"Twice in twenty-four hours I've washed my hands of something," he thought.

Outside the washroom he stopped to get a cup of coffee from the stewardess.

"How soon will we land?" he asked conversationally.

"In another hour," she replied. "There'll be a two hour wait for the Venus ship, if that's where you're going."



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"What made you think I was going to Venus?" Arnold asked. He eyed her curiously.

She shrugged. "It was just that most people catch the plane that will get them to Spaceport the last thing before sailing time."

"Oh," Arnold muttered.

He went back to his seat with the coffee. He sipped it occasionally, and watched the terrain slip by ten thousand feet below.

Someone slipped into the seat beside him. He frowned in annoyance and turned to see who it was.

It was the stewardess. She gave him a friendly smile. He looked at her clear, unpowdered face, her frank blue eyes. He returned her smile halfheartedly.

"How's the coffee?" she asked.

Arnold's smile broadened. She undoubtedly knew how the coffee was. It made a nice opening gambit, that question.

"Oh, all right," he said.

"You sounded back there like you were suspicious," she went on in a tone that implied the conversation had been well established.

I'll bet, Arnold thought, that her next statement will be that she's through with her run when we reach Spaceport.

"No," he said aloud. "It's just that I've been running into too many coincidences. Last night a cab driver knew which hotel I was staying at without my telling him. When you talked as though you knew I was going to Venus it made me wonder."

"Oh," the stewardess said. She stretched her arms in front of her and stifled a polite yawn. "I'll be glad when we land," she added casually. "Then my run is over. I'll be off for fourteen hours."

"Dinner?" Arnold invited.

"Oh!" She pretended surprise. "I didn't mean to hint."

"I didn't think you did," Arnold lied. "Or I wouldn't have invited you."

"Well . . . all right," she accepted. "I'll meet you in the waiting-room twenty minutes after we land. I have to check out."

"O.K.," Arnold said. "I'll be there."

After she had left him he looked at the plane personnel listed on a board beside the pilot compartment door. He found at the bottom of the list, "Stewardess: Miss Nancy Race."

Nancy Race, Arnold thought. Nancy isn't a bad name. Always sounds ungrownup though.

Nancy looked quite grown up when she met him in the waiting room, however. She had changed into a very becoming pastel green nylon dress that did things to her that every dress should do to every girl. Her skin was a more healthy pink than ever in contrast to the green. Her dark brown, almost black hair seemed to pick up the pink of her face and the green of her shoulders and reflect them from its depths.

Arnold wondered why she had practically picked him up when she could undoubtedly have her pick of men who hadn't just been given the brushoff by a girl who works in a cocktail lounge.

He took her arm as they went through the exit door to the taxi stand. In the taxi she laid her arm



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between them on the seat. He took her hand. She neither responded nor drew away.

He held her hand and thought about this while the taxi sped toward the business district of Spaceport. It was fairly dark now. The streetlights shone through the car windows, lighting up Nancy's features intermittently. They held a faraway look.

Suddenly Arnold leaned forward and kissed her. When she didn't draw away he pressed his lips against hers more firmly. She responded, her lips pressing into his.

When he drew away she didn't move her head, but looked at him, her eyes half veiled. He kissed her again. She put her arms around his neck.

Arnold put his arms around her waist and drew her close. He closed his eyes—and Mary's face looked at him from his mind's eye. It wasn't accusing. He looked at it objectively. It wasn't as beautiful as Nancy's face. In many ways it was almost plain. But it was there.

Arnold disengaged his arms and sat back. Nancy laid her head back on the cushion of the seat and watched him without speaking.

The cab slipped into thick traffic. Several blocks of this and it drew into the curb at the entrance to an ornate restaurant.

Inside, they were shown to a table against the wall. They ordered, then looked at each other while they waited. Arnold offered Nancy a cigarette. When she declined, he lit one for himself.

"You're in love with someone, aren't you?" Nancy asked casually.

"No," Arnold said quickly. "That is, it takes two to make a thing like that."

"You love her and she doesn't love you," Nancy said. "Is that it?"

"No," Arnold denied. "It's just that—well, I met a girl last night. She ran away. I tried to find her and couldn't, though I think she could have at least told me she didn't want anything more to do with me."

"That seems strange," Nancy said thoughtfully.

The waiter brought the soup. They were silent until he had left.

During the next hour Arnold gradually told her the entire story. She listened gravely, asking questions now and then to keep him going. He came to the part about the note Joan had brought from the other room, then told how he hadn't seen the ink stain on his finger until the plane was taking off.

"You gave the note back to Joan?" Nancy asked. At Arnold's nod she asked, "Do you know whether or not it was in Mary's handwriting?"

"I'd never seen her handwriting," Arnold answered.

"You're sure that ink stain came from that note?" Nancy persisted.

"I didn't touch anything freshly written but that," Arnold answered.

"How about at the Hotel?" Nancy asked. "Did you pay your bill as you left? Did they give you a receipt?"

Arnold reached into his breastpocket and brought out the hotel bill. It was an i.b.m. receipt, with no handwriting on it. Nancy looked at it with him, then sat back.

"I'd suggest you take the Venus ship," she said, finally.

"Why?" Arnold asked. "Oh, I see.



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You agree that it was to get rid of me. You're advising me to take the trip and forget about her. That right?"

"No," Nancy said. "I think Mary will be on that ship. I think the note was just what it seemed to be—not what the ink stain implied." She paused, laying her arms on the table and crossing her fingers together. "There are so many other explanations of that ink stain that might be true," she went on. "The note could have been written with a cheap ever-writing pen. The ink in them never gets completely dry. Or your finger could have been damp for some reason and moistened the ink as you held the note."

Arnold's eyes grew bright with hope.

"I believe you're right," he said. He glanced at his watch. "I'll have to run," he said, rising. "There's just time for me to get out to the spaceport terminal and check in."

"Us," Nancy said, rising with him. "I'm going along."

"You can't!" Arnold said in surprise.

"You can't stop me," Nancy said. "I have just as much of a right to take a trip to Venus—as anybody." She tossed her head defiantly.

Arnold and Nancy held hands as they ran from the taxi into the spaceport depot. Her heels tapped rapidly on the marble floor, attracting the attention of the man behind the counter who was just closing the passenger list for the ship.

In moments they were through the red tape and running for the elevator. The elevator dropped them to the subway platform. They waited impatiently in the one car train. Five minutes later a uniformed man came out of the elevator with the passenger list. He got on the car.

The car gained speed smoothly and rapidly, rushing through the underground tube out into the rocket takeoff field. The three miles to the takeoff area consumed five minutes. When the subway car stopped, Arnold and Nancy ran to the waiting elevator that would carry them up through the heart of the concrete launching frame to boarding level.

A few minutes later they were securely encased in the mountainous sponge rubber shock cushions that dotted the take-off deck.

Arnold clamped his teeth on the breathing tube as the front half of the cushion folded in on him. There was nothing else to do now until the ship was safely above the stratosphere, steady on its course, everything functioning smoothly. When that time came, the passengers would be released. Until that time, safe in the sponge rubber buffer, the passengers would not be hurt even if the ship turned and plunged to the ground at express train speed.

There were ingredients in the air that came through the breathing tube that acted as a mild sedative. He felt them take effect, quieting his nerves but not making him sleepy.

His stomach told him when the ship began to rise. An unbelievably short time later the front half of his soft prison opened. He was free to step out.

Nancy was beside him instantly, her eyes alight with excitement.



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"Are we really on our way?" she asked.

"Yes," Arnold said. "Haven't you ever ridden on a spaceship before?"

"No," she said.

"Well, I'll be—" Arnold said slowly. "Come on. Let's go upstairs."

There were four elevators forming a square tube that ran in the longitudinal axis of the ship. Arnold and Nancy entered one of these elevators.

"We'll go to the lounge," Arnold explained. "We wait there until we're called to be assigned to our staterooms.

Nancy stayed close to his side, a smile of excitement on her face. Arnold stole her a glance now and then, wonderingly.

"Mary begins to seem something far away," he thought. "I almost hope she isn't on board."

That thought made him look around at the others in the elevator. His eyes came to rest on the face of a man near the elevator. He stiffened in surprise.

"What is it, Arnold?" Nancy asked, feeling his tenseness against her.

Arnold bent over and whispered in her ear.

"That man by the door," he said. "I'd swear he's the first cab driver. The one that drove Mary away last night when Joe and I were fighting on the sidewalk."

Nancy's eyes shot toward the door. Arnold straightened up and studied the man closely.

He was looking off into space in a bored way. There was no slightest doubt now. It was the cab driver. But what was he doing on board a ship going to Venus? He was wearing an ordinary business suit. His clothes were neither new nor old, and were better quality than the average cab driver can afford.

Nancy tugged at Arnold's sleeve. He bent down.

"That proves what I suspected," she whispered. "There's dirty work in this somewhere. Let's keep our eye on him."

Arnold nodded.

The elevator came to a stop. The doors opened. The cab driver was the first to get out. When Nancy and Arnold emerged a minute later he was settling into an overstuffed chair along the circular wall with the tired ease of one who has nothing to do and days to do it in.

Arnold automatically classified him as an experienced space traveller from that. And that added even more to the mystery.

His eyes left the cab driver and roamed about the huge lounge that covered a full cross section of the ship. There were other people emerging from the elevators and walking about across the floor.

Arnold's hand came up and gripped Nancy's arm. He pointed by nodding his head in the direction of a man who had just come out of another elevator.

"There's the other cab driver," he said. "The second one. The one who talked me out of following Joe, and who knew where I was staying without my telling him."

"And there's Joe!" Nancy said, pointing at another man.

Arnold looked in the direction she had pointed. Joe was sitting in a



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chair, his huge frame relaxed against its back. His legs were crossed, one foot rocking idly.

"The two cab drivers and Joe!" Arnold said. "Now, I'm sure Mary will be on board. But—I can't understand it. Why should they be here?"

"That should be obvious," Nancy said. "They knew you were going to be on board."

"But I wasn't!" Arnold objected. "I was going to turn around and go back until you pointed out to me the other way that ink stain could have gotten on my finger!"

"They didn't know that," Nancy said. "Look around and see if you can find Mary. Everyone will be right here in this room pretty soon."

Arnold let his eyes roam about the lounge, now and then bringing them to rest on each of the three, the two cab drivers and Joe.

But inside him a chill was creeping into his mind. Something clicked into place. Nancy had known who Joe was, had recognized him and pointed him out to him. Nancy, who was an airline stewardess, not supposed to know Joe. Nancy who had at a moment's notice thrown up her airline job to come with him on this ship to Venus.

Mary came out of the elevator. She walked almost straight toward Arnold, passing within a few feet of him, without seeing him. He reached out a hand as if to stop her, but didn't.

The reason he didn't was because he saw that her eyes were fixed intently on Joe.

"Look!" Nancy said, jerking his sleeve.

Arnold looked where she directed. The first cab driver, the one who had taken Mary away in his cab, was following her quickly.

Even as they looked he caught up with her. His hand gripped her arm. She stopped. He spoke to her rapidly. Her eyes darted over toward Arnold for a fraction of a second that made his heart leap, then drop again as her eyes turned away impersonally.

Arnold's thoughts became confused. If Mary had taken this ship to be with him, then why hadn't she rushed over to him? Why was her glance as cold and impersonal as that of a total stranger?

He felt eyes on him. He looked over at Joe. Joe was looking at him, a derisive smile on his massive face. Arnold realized abruptly that Joe had seen him right at the start, and had been ignoring him.

A dozen impulses fought for release in Arnold's thoughts. To go to Mary and ask her why she ignored him. To go over and ask Joe what it was all about. To ask the two drivers how they happened to be here on a ship to Venus.

Suddenly they left him. He would play the same game as the others. He took Nancy's arm, smiling down at her casually, guiding her across the lounge in the general direction of the spot where Mary and the cab driver and stood talking together earnestly.

He passed Mary within a few feet. She looked up at him briefly. He nodded his head at her, an impersonal smile on his lips. She didn't return the greeting. But there was something in her eyes. Was it fear? Arnold had the impression



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that she was hiding a deep, stark fear.

He didn't look back, but went on to the triangular bar with Nancy. They took stools and ordered drinks. Arnold held Nancy's hand in his at the edge of the counter and toyed with its fingers gravely. There was something comfortable about Nancy, he decided.

"She seemed afraid of something. Did you get that impression?" Nancy asked.

"Yes," Arnold said. "I got it. Maybe she's afriad of me."

"You don't mean that," Nancy said. "But consider the queerness of everything. Two men who were driving cabs last night are on board this ship, apparently anything but cab drivers. A bouncer in a night club is here, lounging in a chair as though that was all he had ever done in his life. Mary, a girl you first saw in the cocktail lounge of the hotel you were staying in, and who ran away from you while Joe was apparently beating up on you and you apparently didn't have a chance to win, is also here, and is deathly afraid of something. So afraid that she doesn't dare to talk to you."

"And don't forget the girl who was an airline stewardess two or three hours ago," Arnold said, doubling Nancy's middle finger into the palm of her hand. "And who threw up her job without bothering to resign, just to dash off on a trip to Venus with a man she had never seen before."

"Yes," Nancy said quietly. "Don't forget her."

Arnold looked at her sharply. Her eyes looked into his unwaveringly.

Two days passed. They were days during which Arnold and Nancy spent long hours playing cards in the lounge while they waited for some glimpse of Mary or Joe or the two cab drivers. But those four didn't show up. They were apparently staying in their rooms.

Once during each of those days Nancy and Arnold had gone up to the observation room and looked out into space at the almost solid dome of stars, brilliantly cold, the Earth and Moon, large and sharply detailed, and the Sun.

The Sun was an awesome spectacle. There was a special telescope to look at it through. The telescope had a black disc in it to hide the Sun itself. Then all the grandeur of the corona was revealed, with its lazy swirlings of radiant fire that reached outward in a futile attempt at escape.

And during those two days Arnold grew more and more restless for action. The passenger list had been posted. From it he had learned the room numbers of Joe and Mary. Not knowing the names of the two cab drivers he wasn't able to learn their room numbers.

It was the third evening. Arnold and Nancy were playing two-handed rummy.

"Oh!" Arnold said suddenly. "I've had rummy for three draws and didn't notice it."

He laid his hand down apologetically.

Nancy counted up the score and wrote it down. Then she laid the pencil and score pad aside.

"If I were you," she started. She



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clamped her lips together and stopped.

"I know what you're thinking," Arnold said. "But is it the right way? I've done quite a bit of knocking around. I've found it's always best to let the other guy make the first move. Of course, up to now the other guy always has. Maybe he won't this time. Then I'll have to."

"So you have decided something is wrong," Nancy said. "You're talking like there's an enemy."

"What else could Joe be?" Arnold asked. "And those two taxi drivers? They maneuvered me like past masters! I wish I knew what they were up to. Nothing makes sense at all."

"I've thought of a way that makes more sense out of things," Nancy said, putting the cards back in the box. "Let's suppose that Mary wasn't a cocktail waitress at all, but took the job in order to meet you or get you to notice her."

"That doesn't make any sense at all," Arnold objected. "There are any number of other ways. Anyway, how could she know I would go in and get a drink there?"

"It'll make more sense in a minute," Nancy said. "I want to ask you, was going into that nightclub where you met Joe your idea or Mary's?"

"I don't know," Arnold hesitated. "We were just going from one place to another. Sort of seeing the nightlife of the town. I didn't know the place existed, of course. It could have been her idea."

"And in that place she said to you that you were either a liar or a coward." Nancy went on. "Then she got up and left—and Joe stopped you, or tried to. Are you sure it wasn't a put up job?"

"I don't think so," Arnold said, smiling and caressing his knuckles. "I can't imagine anyone letting me use their chin for target practice on purpose."

"Are you sure he worked there as a bouncer?" Nancy asked.

"Why," Arnold said, frowning. "I guess I assumed he did. No. Afterwards he said he'd lost his job because I knocked him out."

"But you don't know he worked there except from what he said," Nancy insisted. "And that taxi. You said it was just cruising along the street?"

"Yes," Arnold said. "It came around the corner right after I joined Mary on the sidewalk. She flagged it and it stopped."

"It came around the corner," Nancy mused. "It could have been there when she came out of the club. She could have told the driver to go around the block and come back."

"That's no good," Arnold said. "What would she do that for?"

"To make it look like the cab had just been cruising," Nancy said. "Then what happens? Joe comes back. Joe gets in and shoves you with his foot when you try to get in. He and the cab dash down the street. Another cab just happens to be cruising by. You take it and follow Joe, but your driver talks you into going back to the hotel, and knows which hotel it is."

"The way you tell it," Arnold said. "It sounds like it could all tie in. It



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obviously has to, since the two cab drivers, Joe, and Mary, are all on board. But why? It still doesn't make any sense."

"It does to me," Nancy said. "Mary did what I might have done in her place. She pretended to think you were a liar or a coward in order to make you want to prove to her your weren't either. You'd do that by chasing after her and taking her back to to the hospital with you so she could see for herself. I think she's for you.

"But Joe stops that completely. And the taxi driver speeds off when it would be natural for Mary to at least wait and see how the fight turned out. Where'd he take her? Home? Her roommate said no until she found the note. And the note was designed to make you drop the job you had completely and rush to catch this ship. It almost slipped up because of the wet ink, but it worked."

"Then you think that Joe and the two cab drivers were deliberately trying to keep me from going back to the hospital and doing my job?" Arnold asked incredulously. "Why? What possible connection could that have with it?"

"That's the missing link," Nancy said with a firm nod. "It could be the doctors are wrong, and that the dream world has some connection with this world."

"I wonder," Arnold said slowly. "You know, when I first saw Mary in the cocktail lounge at the hotel she reminded me of the picture of one of the persons in that dream world."

Arnold sat up, a startled look on his face.

"What is it?" Nancy asked.

"I just thought of a possible explanation," Arnold said. "Those people in that dream world are still alive, legally. If one of them were heavily insured the beneficiary couldn't collect until he or she actually died. There's trouble in that dream world that makes the doctors call in a troubleshooter to straighten things out. Suppose it didn't work? Suppose I, the trouble-shooter, am enticed into a trip to Venus? And the doctors have to give up and let all those twenty die?"

"That makes sense," Nancy siad excitedly. "They use Mary for bait. Maybe against her will." She glanced hastily at Arnold. "Certainly against her will," she corrected.

"Then the thing for me to do," Arnold said, standing up, "is to go pin Mary down. Find out for sure. If it's true, then I'll talk the captain into letting me return to Earth in one of the lifeboats."

"Want to come in with me, Nancy?" Arnold asked in a low voice.

"No," Nancy said. "You go in alone. I'll stay here at the end of the corridor and watch."

Arnold looked down at her. She was nervous, worried for him. Yet she was letting him go into Mary's room alone. On impulse he took her face between the palms of his hands and kissed her.

When he walked down the corridor to Mary's room he looked back. Nancy was standing there, her eyes following him, a dazed, happy expression on her face. He wanted to go back and put his arms around her and forget all about Mary. But he turned his back to Nancy and knocked on Mary's door.



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"Come in," Mary's voice sounded from inside.

Arnold turned the knob and opened the door. He glanced once more at Nancy, then stepped inside.

Mary was standing in the center of the room, her eyes two coals of light. Arnold closed the door at his back. Only then did he see the man who had been standing behind it.

The man was the first cab driver. He held a gun in his fist. The gun was pointed at Arnold.

"What took you so long?" the cab driver asked good naturedly. "We've been waiting two days for you. We expected you the minute the passenger list was posted."

The bedroom door opened. Joe stepped out. He left the door open. A moment later the second cab driver stepped out. The three stood looking at Arnold. Mary remained where she was, a strained expression on her face.

"Looks purty, doesn't he, Mary," Joe said. He stepped toward Arnold slowly. Suddenly his hand shot out and knocked Arnold sideways.

Arnold staggered under the unexpected blow. He tried to straighten and get his bearing. Two large hams enfolded his head. Joe's knee came up into his stomach viciously. He doubled over, retching.

"That's enough, Joe," one of the two cab drivers said.

"But I owe it to the guy," Joe said pleadingly. "And I want to change his face so Mary won't like him so well."

"That's enough," the cab driver said.

Arnold rolled over onto his back and looked up through pain blurred eyes.

"What's it all about?" he gasped. "That's all I want to know. What's it all about?"

The second cab driver, the one who had known too much, came and stood over Arnold, a serenely amused expression on his face.

"It's very simple, Mr. Taschereau," he said. "You see, we plan to murder you. That's all you need be interested in. We plan to get rid of your body here in space. It will never be found. No corpus delecti, no murder charge. Especially if no suspicions are arroused while we're doing it."

"You'll never get away with it," Arnold said.

"Oh, you mean the young lady out in the corridor?" the cab driver said.

"What young lady?" Arnold asked. "You mean the one that is listening just outside the door? She'll run the minute the knob starts to turn, and tell the captain." He spoke loudly.

With a muttered exclamation the first cab driver sprang to the door. Arnold's foot shot out in his way catching him so that he dove headlong into the base of the door. His gun slid an inch. It lay on the rug just at the tip of his fingers.

Arnold rolled over twice before he reached it. His fingers closed around it. In a continuation of his roll he sat up against the wall and swung the gun around toward the other cab driver.

Before he could pull the trigger a flash of black streaked past his face. There was a sharp pain in his wrist. He dropped the gun. Joe had kicked it out of his hand.

Joe bent over and picked it up. It was a mistake. Arnold's knee caught



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him somewhere in the face. The blow brought Joe to his knees.

His hand that held the gun was on the floor. Arnold brought his heel down on the back of that hand. Bending forward swiftly, he pulled the gun free from Joe's paralyzed fingers.

He had it by the barrel. He couldn't get his other hand around to make a switch, and dared not try anything with one hand.

Joe was shaking his head and trying to rise. Arnold tapped him urgently on the head. Joe's body went limp, sprawling onto Arnold's legs, imprisoning them.

But now Arnold's hands were free. He switched the gun around and swung its muzzle toward the other cab driver. There was the sound of a shot. Arnold answered it with a shot from the gun he held.

He saw a dark hole appear in the coat-sleeve of the cab driver. The gun the cab driver held slipped from his fingers.

"Don't pick it up," Arnold warned.

Joe groaned and started to move. Arnold brought the gun down sharply on his head again. Joe's body twitched. Arnold doubled his knees so that Joe slid off his legs.

He got to his feet by sliding his back up the wall until he was erect. He stood there, swaying slightly, but in full command of the situation.

"Thank God!" Mary cried. She stepped toward Arnold, her arms going out oo him.

"Stand back, Mary," Arnold said, pointing the gun toward her. When she stopped, a surprised expression on her face, he added lamely, "You might get in the line of fire in case I have to shoot somebody."

"Oh," she said weakly; but Arnold saw that she knew he had suspected her.

He went over and picked up the other gun, pocketing it. Then he went to the door and rolled the still unconscious cab driver out of the way. Opening the door, he called for Nancy to come in.

She came in quickly. She had been just outside the door. Sizing things up briefly, she looked at Arnold and smiled triumphantly.

"So you have them all," she said.

"It looks like it," Arnold grinned. "Can you handle a gun?" He took the second gun from his coat pocket and gave it to her.

He turned away from Mary's hurt look with his face slightly red. Then he turned back to her angrily.

"I can't help it, Mary," he said. "I don't know what this is all about. I don't know what your part in it is, either. Until I know, and know positively, I don't know who to trust." He turned to the cab driver. "And now's the time for you to start talking," he said grimly. "I've had all I can stomach."

The man shrugged his shoulders. Arnold reached him in two swift steps and brought the point of his gun viciously against his collar bone. He heard the bone snap.

"Talk," he said. "Talk or I'll break some more bones."

"What do you want to know?" the man said.

"Why do you want to kill me?" Arnold demanded.

"You mean kill you first," the man answered.

"Kill me first?" Arnold echoed. "Are you crazy? The first time I ever saw you was last night. There's no



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reason why I would have been even interested in you. You were just a cab driver!"

"You were hired to kill us," the man said doggedly. "Joe was at the hospital. He heard you and Dr. Bridewell talking about it. He put his ear to the doctor's door and heard him say, 'There are only three. I probably make it sound very coldblooded, but I'm sure you will find they need killing.' He heard some more after that. Enough to know you agreed to take the job."

"This is all a mistake," Arnold said, laughing in relief. "We weren't talking about real people. Joe just didn't understand. I can see how he came to that conclusion though, even though it's wrong. But—" He turned to Nancy. Maybe I was right about what I figured out. These three want those twenty to die so they can collect some insurance. They had a guilty conscience. They figured Dr. Bridewell knew about their scheme and was hiring me to kill them."

"It looks like it, Arnold," Nancy said.

"No!" Mary spoke up. "That isn't true."

"Maybe you'll tell me the answers then, Mary," Arnold said. "You aren't under the power of these three any more. You can speak freely and tell me what's happened—and why."

"I—I thought all along that you knew," Mary said hesitantly. "I thought you knew and were just playing with me. Pretending you didn't know. Coming into the cocktail lounge and deliberately spilling your drink on your suit so I'd have to pay attention to you made me think that."

"That was an accident," Arnold said. "Anyway, what was I supposed to know all along?"

"When you told me about Dr. Bridewell hiring you to kill Joe, Benny, and Fred, I was certain that you knew I knew them, and that you could get to them through me."

"The two cab drivers are Benny and Fred?" Arnold said. "Glad to know you. But whatever gave you the idea I was hired to kill them? It was three guys in that dream world, not three real people."

"Don't you understand?" Mary said exasperatedly. "THIS IS THE DREAM WORLD!"

"You shouldn't have told him, Mary," the cab driver, Benny, said. "Now he'll kill me and Fred and Joe."

Arnold looked from one face to another, his mind shaken, his thoughts trying to bring rationality out of chaos. His eyes finally settled on Nancy's face pleadingly.

"It can't be true, can it Nancy?" he asked. "You're not just a dream are you?"

"What Mary said is true, Arnold," Nancy said quietly.

"But it just can't be," Arnold said. He stamped his foot on the floor. "See? The floor is perfectly solid. It isn't the stuff that dreams are made out of. It's real."

No one answered him.

"I went into the dream world," Arnold said. "Remember? I told both of you girls about that. I got stuck in a snowdrift and asked to be taken out again. They brought me out of it. I haven't gone back in since. I would have known it if I had."

Benny moved suddenly. He got behind Nancy and took her gun



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away from her. He backed against a wall, holding her in front of him as a shield, the gun in his hand pointed at Arnold.

"Drop your gun, Arnold," he said. "I'll kill you if you don't."

Beads of perspiration were standing out on his forehead. Arnold stared at him stupidly for a minute.

"His collar bone's broken, Nancy," he said. "He can't hold you if you struggle."

Benny pulled the trigger of his gun just as Nancy moved. She spoiled his aim. Benny let her go and brought the gun up again.

Arnold fired without aiming. The bullet caught Benny in the chest. Arnold watched him warily until he had dropped his gun and sunk to the floor.

Then he turned around and looked down at Fred, the other cab driver. Benny's bullet had ploughed into Fred's back, killing him instantly.

Joe was trying to turn over on his back. He had just come to and didn't know what had happened.

Mary ran and threw herself protectively in front of Joe.

"Don't shoot him," she pleaded.

"Why?" Arnold asked dully.

"Because she loves him," Nancy said.

She went to Arnold and took his arm, looking up into his eyes. He tried to look away, but couldn't. He realized suddenly that he hadn't loved Mary. Just as surely he knew that he loved Nancy.

Suddenly he turned his head away, hot tears blinding him. He loved Nancy—and she was just a dream. Somewhere in the world of reality her body, or what was left of it from some accident, lay in a small room, kept alive by serums and pumps.

"Let's go and leave Mary and Joe alone," Nancy said softly.

"Yes," Mary said. "Leave us alone. Go away. Don't come back."

Arnold dropped his gun from limp fingers and let Nancy lead him out through the door. He stood quietly waiting while she turned and closed the door.

Then she took his arm. They walked slowly down the corridor. Nancy took his hand and pulled it around her waist, and wound her own arm around his. Arnold looked down at her, smiling wanly.

She wasn't looking at him. Her eyes were closed. Her lips were moving, as if in prayer.

Hot tears blinded Arnold's eyes again. He looked away, his vision blurring.

"Damn," he muttered. "I can't see a thing!"

"Well open your eyes then," a familiar voice said.

Startled, Arnold opened his eyes. Around him were the almost forgotten details of the room where he had lain down on the cot and been given the injection that sent him into the dream world.

The internes were loosening the straps that held him still. They were smiling at him.

"You did a wonderful job, Mr. Taschereau," Dr. Bridewell said. "Wonderful."

Arnold looked at the doctor's face. In street clothes, and without the contact lenses, he would have looked exactly like Benny.



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"Put on your clothes and come to my office," the doctor said when the internes had loosened all the straps. "Help him get dressed, boys. He's probably still a little weak from the ordeal he's gone through." He turned abruptly and left the room.

Ten minutes later Arnold opened the door to the doctor's office and went in. Dr. Bridewell looked up at him cheerily, his contact lenses reflecting and refracting the light in gargoylish distortion.

"What I want to know," Arnold said before the doctor could speak to him, "is, why did you have to fool me? Or did you? Why did I land in that snowstorm in the first dreamworld, and then apparently come into this very room and then walk out and apparently go back to the hotel, while all the time I was still under that hood in the dream world?"

"It was a little trick we had to play on you," Dr. Bridewell said seriously. "We had to tell you what you were to do, but we also had to convince you you weren't in a dream world while you did it. Under that drug you're open to hypnotic suggestion. We deliberately sent you into a dream setup where you would get so discouraged so fast that when we brought you out of that and sent you into the other dream world you would be convinced it was the old reality."

"I see," Arnold said. He sat down in a chair near the desk. He looked at the floor, his expression gloomy. Several seconds passed in silence. He sighed and rubbed his hand over his eyes. Dr. Bridewell watched him.

"Could I—" Arnold said haltingly. "That is, is there any law against—my voluntarily going back into that dreamworld? I mean, if I would rather live in that than in the real world I have plenty of money. I could let the hospital use it, or most of it."

"You mean you want to go back into the dream of those twenty cripples?" Dr. Bridewell asked. "May I ask what your reason is?"

"You may," Arnold said, smiling sadly. "The reason is that I've found a girl in that dream world that I love. I've never found one in real life that I love. And reality is only what you think it to be. That dream world is just as real to those in it as the real world."

"Who is this girl?" Dr. Bridewell asked, smiling.

"Nancy," Arnold said simply.

"Are you sure you know what you're asking?" Dr. Bridewell asked. "Suppose that a year from now, even ten years from now, the desire to return to reality grew too strong in you. If Nancy couldn't return to it with you, you would be divided in your desires."

"I know what I'm asking," Arnold said. "If I thought I could safely manage it, I would 'have an accident' that would force you to put me in the dream bank. I don't suppose you can understand, being a doctor and a scientist. I love Nancy more than life itself."

"Are you sure it isn't just the effects of what you went through?" Dr. Bridewell persisted.

"Of course it is," Arnold said. "Don't you realize that that is what creates love? The effects are lasting."



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"T o u c h e," Dr. Bridewell said, chuckling. "But now I guess I may as well admit that I've played another little trick on you. A rather unfair one."

"Unfair?" Arnold echoed.

"Quite unfair," a voice spoke at Arnold's back.

Arnold half rose and turned his head at the sound of the voice. Standing near the door was Nancy. She was wearing the white uniform of a nurse. And her flawless face was a nice pink in color.

She turned her eyes away in embarrassment.

"NANCY!" Arnold shouted, jumping out of the chair and taking her in his arms. "Is this still a dream? It must be! But how?" He turned to the doctor. "Is she real?"

"Does it make any difference?" Dr. Bridewell taunted him. "After all, you just insisted you would be willing to 'have an accident' to find her again."

Arnold turned back to Nancy and held her face between his hands, his eyes devouring her features, a happy smile on his face.

Then, suddenly, a change came over him. His eyes widened until they were round.

"Doctor!" Nancy cried, concern appearing on her face. She gripped Arnold around the waist as he sagged against her.

The doctor hastily came around his desk and helped her lower Arnold into the chair.

"Get a pan," he said.

Nancy ran into the next room and returned with a half-moon-shaped pan. Dr. Bridewell placed it under Arnold's chin.

"No," Arnold said, shoving it away. "I'll be all right."

He placed his elbows on his knees and cupped his head in his hands, with his palms.

Nancy and the doctor stood watching him, pity on their faces.

"It was just a game," Dr. Bridewell said after a while.

Arnold's shoulders began to shake with silent sobs.

Nancy dropped down at Arnold's feet and held her head against his neck

"I'm one too, my darling," she said.

"We had to do it, Arnold," Dr. Bridewell said pleadingly. "The human mind will become endangered unless it is prepared emotionally in some way that will make it willing to accept things. We had to show you things from a disinterested viewpoint. Otherwise—

"Your dream existence would have become like a beautiful evil flower, an unholy orchid, that wraps its tentacles of madness about you and draws you into its heart where no one can bring you back. Madness.

"We had to take the interests of your life and weave them gradually into things as they really are."

Arnold's hands slowly left his face and went around Nancy's head, drawing her close. His tear dampened cheek pressed against hers. His eyes opened and gazed soullessly at the floor. After a minute they lifted to the doctor.

"How did it happen?" he asked.

"You were in a plane accident," Dr. Bridewell said. He laid his hand on Arnold's shoulder, his fingers

*(Continued on page 123)*



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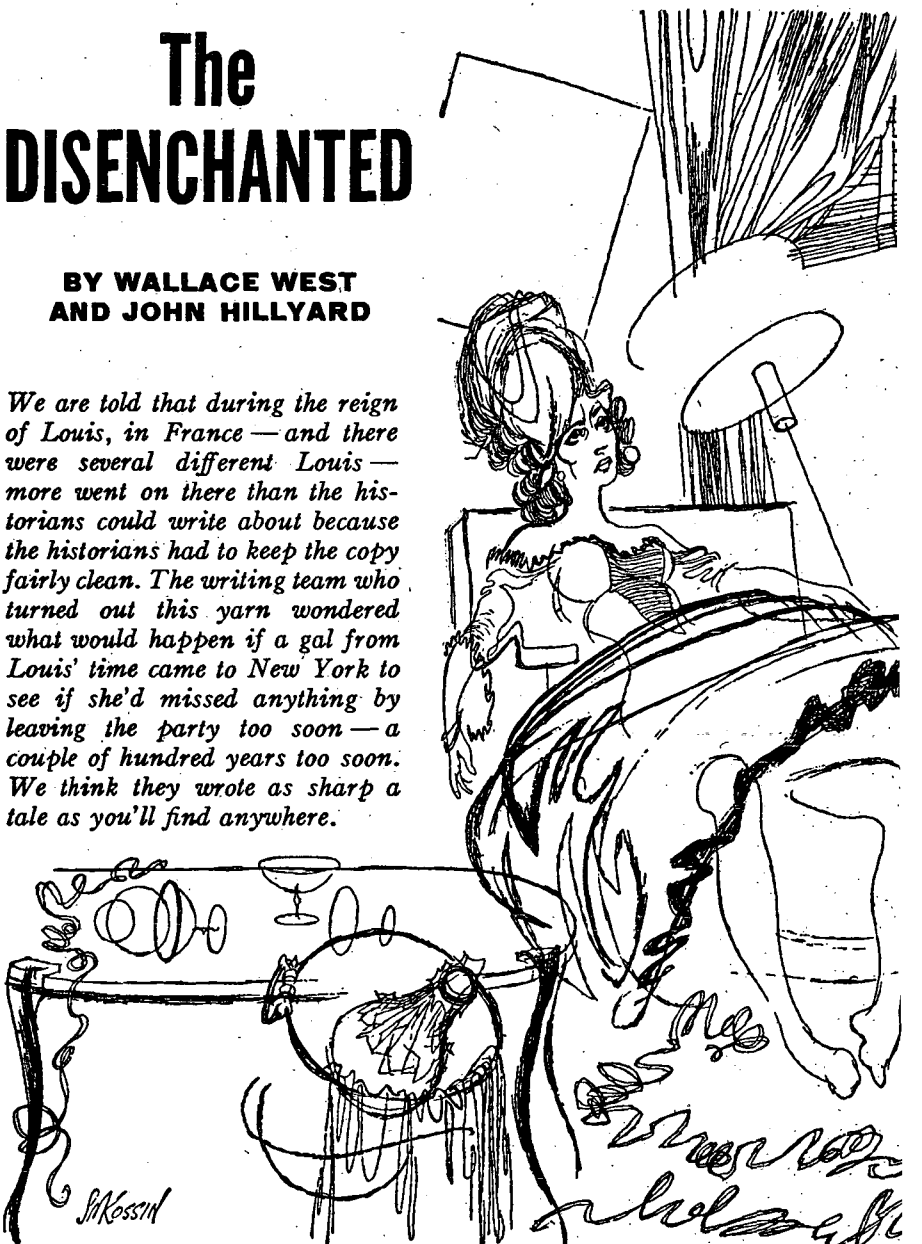
# The DISENCHANTED

**BY WALLACE WEST AND JOHN HILLYARD**

*We are told that during the reign of Louis, in France — and there were several different Louis — more went on there than the historians could write about because the historians had to keep the copy fairly clean. The writing team who turned out this yarn wondered what would happen if a gal from Louis' time came to New York to see if she'd missed anything by leaving the party too soon — a couple of hundred years too soon. We think they wrote as sharp a tale as you'll find anywhere.*

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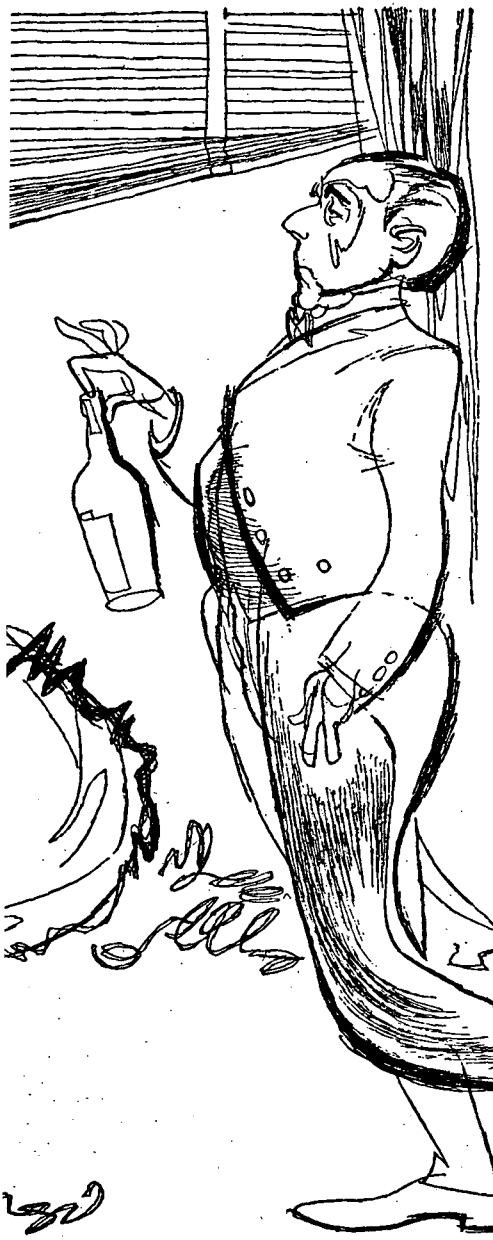

JACKSON admired the set of his white jacket in the hall mirror. He noted, with mixed approval and regret, that the sprinkling of white in his sideburns was increasing. Working for a mad publisher had drawbacks as well as compensation.

He reached for the handle of the study door but drew back with a twinge. Come, Jackson! Qualms would never do. Settling his pointed chin between the wings of his collar, the butler advanced in good and faintly disapproving order.

He surveyed the study in romantic dimness. The lights of upper Broadway twinkled through its vast picture window. A lone fixture above the fireplace softly illuminated a Boucher portrait of Madame Pompadour. Chauncey de Witt had taste, Jackson thought — excellent taste — for a New Yorker.

He switched on the overhead lights and shuddered. The study



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was, of course, a shambles. He turned instinctively toward the Chickering. On its shining top reposed the inevitable Martini glass.

He wiped away the ring and pivoted in search of smouldering cigarette butts. The other pieces of furniture seemed undamaged. The overstuffed chairs had been dragged across the floor he had so carefully polished. They were lined up, two by two, facing the window like animals ready to enter the Ark. He would rearrange them presently. But first . . . He stepped about primly, collecting half-empty glasses and other party debris. Once he found a full glass and salvaged its contents. After that he hummed appropriate snatches from "Buttons and Bows."

"What time is it, Jackson?" Disturbed by the glaring lights, an apparition had risen from one of the high-backed chairs facing the picture window. It yawned, stretched, burped and touched its head gingerly.

"Ten-twenty, Mr. De Witt." The butler carried on with increased briskness.

"Only ten-twenty? Did the liquor run out?"

"Oh no, sir." Jackson righted a toppled magazine rack. "But Miss Farrington did, sir. Out like a light."

"That's no disgrace. So did I. Oh — where is Miss Farrington now?" Chauncey navigated himself around the chair and stood blinking. A pity, thought the butler. Seen at his best, the publisher was truly distinguished . . . prematurely white hair, a smile that made authors want to roll on the floor, just the slightest touch of business man's paunch. Forty-five-ish. But now! Tut! No disloyalty, he told himself. Aloud he said:

"She's in the bathroom, I believe, sir. At least I've been hearing . . ."

"That will do, Jackson!"

"Yes sir." The butler departed hastily with a tray full of glasses. Chauncey collapsed on the divan and tested his knee reflexes until the factotum returned.

"Where's Williams," he asked then.

"He'll be back soon. He had to take Mrs. Morris home. She was quite — ah, unsober, sir. Insisted that your publicity director was the only person at the party who could keep her from getting publicity, in that condition. Made quite a scene about it."

"The old witch! Taxi-riding with Williams again. That must be where she gets her teen-age love backgrounds. But she sells, damn it. She sells!" He studied the slight tremor in his cigarette-stained fingers for a moment. "Jackson —?"

"Yes, Mr. De Witt?" The butler stopped enroute to straighten



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out those suggestive chairs.

"Do you honestly think these things pay off?"

"Things, sir?"

"Oh come off it. You've seen at least 20 author-meets-the-critics bats up here! Are they worth the wear and tear?"

"I should think so, sir . . . if only because they, ah, feed the egos of all concerned."

"Um. And if you were one of the critics invited, you'd dash right out and write a rave notice afterward?"

"That, sir, would depend on when I dashed, I'm afraid."

"Meaning?"

"Well, take tonight. Miss Farrington was superb in that topless evening gown with the sequins. Her accent worked like butter . . ."

"Ah! You fell, too!" Chauncey expanded.

"I was going on to say, sir," the butler mopped at the sticky top of a side table, "that Miss Farrington was superb — up to her fifth cocktail. That's when Sterling North left. I'd say the Tely will be all right tomorrow. The trouble is that most of the critics stayed longer."

"What happened? I got a bit hazy around then."

"I hate to cast aspersions, sir, particularly when you are so fond of Miss Farrington. But five is the lady's limit. It would seem she has had little experience in, shall we say, the fleshpots."

"She actually hasn't, you know." Chauncey managed to fish out a cigarette which Jackson saved him the embarrassment of trying to light.

"That's what I gathered, sir. Nevertheless, having read the lady's book, one would think —"

"Fiction, my dear Jackson, pure fiction! But built on a solid foundation of historical fact, you understand."

"Of course. Yet the episodes of her book seem so vivid. As if they had been lived. That scene with the Duke de Choiseul in the boudoir of Madame de Pompadour . . ."

"That is a stopper, isn't it?" Chauncey was beginning to return to life.

"Oh yes sir. That scene! The suspense. The excitement. You could feel it in your, ah, bones. Lust, sir!"

"Jackson!" Chauncey threw up both hands in mock horror.

"Sorry, sir. It was there! In such glowing detail that . . . Tell me, Mr. De Witt. Can Frenchmen actually do things that way? I would be inclined to think that . . ."

"Remember your position, Jackson!"

"Oh, I never forget *that*, sir." He started cleaning the ashtrays. "And that scene in the forest, after the hunt, when Pompy first meets the king. You remember: Their carriages lock wheels and



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are overturned. And then . . . Oh, sir, Louis must have been quite a king!"

"Well, for my money," Chauncey was up now and pacing the cluttered room, "the best chapter is the one in which Pompy comes to the palace for the first time and challenges Louis' mistress to prove which of them is the, shall we say, better woman."

"Quite right, sir. I couldn't get to sleep the night after I read that. And the magnums of champagne those three drank out of slippers." The butler sighed and his narrow shoulders slumped. "And then to see Miss Farrington after her sixth. It was a shock, sir, I can assure you."

"Disillusion is always a shock, Jackson. You'll get over it. Meanwhile, bring me a drink. This quiet is ruining my nerves. And leave the door open. Some dame must have been using musk. I abominate the stuff."

As the butler catfooted out, Chauncey struck a pose in front of the fireplace and stared moodily at Pompadour's portrait.

"Well, Pompy," he said, "at least you can't be disillusioned by the doings of Miss Fern Farrington, either in print or in the flesh. And *what* flesh, six cocktails notwithstanding! You'll lose no sleep, Madame, because of the filth I'm publishing about you next week. Thank the stars you're dead, woman, and gone to play dainty shepherdesses in some heavenly theater. You're not forced to be a literary pimp in order to pay last year's income tax. Pompy, I envy you. I sincerely do. And I take this *tete-a-tete* as an occasion to apologize for the grievous wrong I am about to do your memory. We, who are about to lie, salute you." He bowed from the waist and immediately regretted the action.

"Those sentiments, Monsieur De Witt," said a soft contralto voice, "are the first decent ones I ever heard you express."

Chauncey spun around tipsily and gulped. A woman had risen from one of the chairs before the window where she had been concealed. She was approaching him slowly behind a solid barrier of that musky perfume.

The publisher shook his head savagely, closed his eyes, opened them and squinted to get in focus. The belated guest; she must be a holdover from the party, he told himself, although he could not remember having met her. She was wearing a heavy brocade crinoline in a raw electric blue that clashed with the room's warm pastel shades. Her pale eyes had crow's feet at their corners. Her face was made up crudely; dead white with blue-red circles on the cheekbones and no lipstick. Her head looked tiny as a doll's under a high, powdered wig bedecked



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with rumpled silk ribbons.

"My God, who are you?" he demanded.

"You don't recognize me?" asked that haunting voice.

"Can't say I do." He fished out a cigarette and had trouble with his lighter again. "Sorry. Perhaps if you'd refresh my memory . . . There's something familiar . . . But no." He shook his head, gently this time. "I'm afraid . . ."

"Monsieur, you have the honor to address Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson le Normant D'Etioles, la Marquise de Pompadour."

"Pleased to meet you." He did a slow take. "La Marquise de . . ." Suddenly he was yelling: "Jackson. Jackson. Quick!"

"Monsieur seems *etonée*," she smiled coldly.

"Yes. It's the pink elephant effect. I never seem to get used to it. Jackson! *A moi!*"

"Here you are sir." The butler returned, bearing two highballs. "And Madame!" He presented the tray with a low bow.

"Did you know she was here?"

"Not exactly, sir. But in this apartment —"

"*A votre sale sante*," said the woman, lifting her glass.

"*Prosit*." Chauncey was fighting to regain his poise. "And I remember enough French to know that was a dirty crack." He drank. "Ah. That's better. Now let's start all over again. I'm afraid I didn't catch the name."

"The name is Pompadour," she snapped. "You may kiss my hand."

Just drunk enough to fall into the spirit of the thing, Chauncey knelt to kiss her long, cool fingers. "Charmed, I'm sure," he said, rising and taking another long drink. "And what brings you out of — er, retirement, Madame?"

"Defamations," she answered grimly. "Lies. Sly insinuations. Your Miss Farrington has *calomnie* the character of the First Lady of France!"

"Miss Farrington? Now who's defaming? Jackson, do you hear what I hear?"

"Am I supposed to, sir?"

"You certainly are. Now look here, Madame Whoever-You-Are," Chauncey glared down at his unwelcome guest, "I've had a hard day. I've been acting De Witt before a pack of literary wolves, as well as playing papa to a budding authoress. I'm in no mood for games. I've — in short, may I call you a taxi?"

"I have my own means of transportation, thank you." Was that a ghost of a smile on her pale but beautifully formed lips? "In the meantime, let us discuss the business, as you colonists so quaintly put it."

"Business? Then we need another drink. Jackson!"



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"Certainly sir. A sulphur cocktail, sir?" He faded out of the door.

"You were saying, Miss —?" the publisher began.

"Not Miss! Madame Pompadour, *maîtresse déclarée* to His Glorious Majesty, King Louis Quinze of France and —"

"Look here!" Chauncey was losing patience. "I don't know whether you're an escapee from the loony bin or whether this is a gag cooked up by Simon and Schuster. But go away now. I'm not laughing!"

"I am not here to make you laugh, Monsieur de Witt, but to demand my rights as a woman."

"Go talk to Dr. Kinsey, then. I have my hands full with Miss Farrington."

"That wench! She should be in the Bastille instead of in your bathroom."

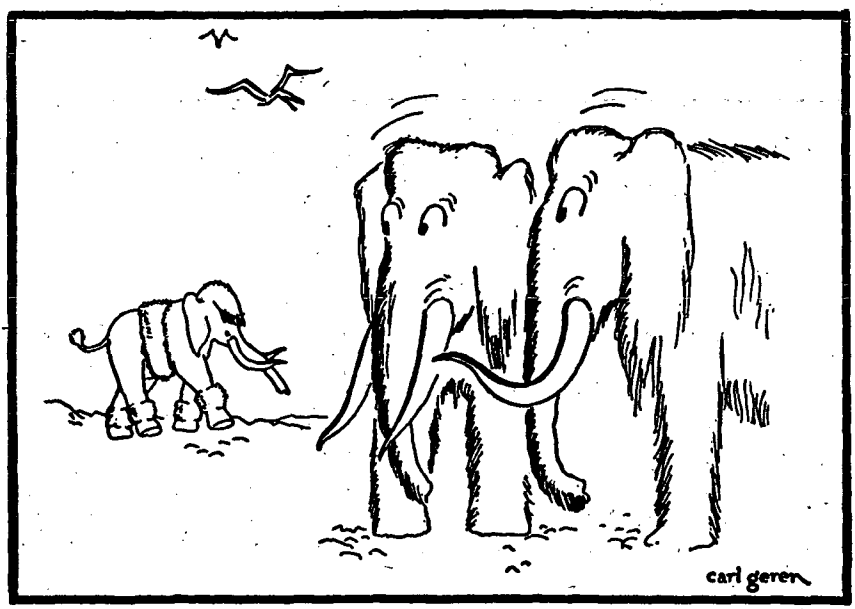
"Indeed!" He found himself shouting. "This begins to sound like a shakedown. Just what is your little game, Madame? What's the racket?"

"Game? Racket?" She lifted eyebrows.

"What do you want?" he snarled.

"Justice, you insufferable *chou!*" she snarled right back.

"By God, that's an idea! Jackson!" As that long-suffering individual scampered in with drinks he commanded, "Please get




"A trifle daring, don't you think?"



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me the Department of Justice."

"The Department of —?" The butler's literal mind struggled with this concept as he headed for the telephone. "Justice. Very well, sir."

"You needn't bother, *garçon*," said the self-professed Pompadour. "It won't work."

"What won't work?" Chauncey goggled at her.

"That abomination called the telephone."

"Now, Madame," he soothed, "won't you sit down in this comfortable chair," he pushed one forward, "while we talk this matter over like old friends. I am sure there has been a misunderstanding, but in the meantime . . ."

"The lady is right," said Jackson, jiggling the hook. "It won't work, sir. The phone is dead."

"Now will you believe, Mr. De Witt?" She smiled quizzically.

"Because you cut my phone cord?" he began. Then his voice dripped honey. "Why certainly I believe . . . Jackson, use the phone in the lobby."

"That won't work, either," she murmured. "No telephone will work. My good friend, Alec Bell, has just uninvented the telephone."

"Alec Bell?" wailed Chauncey. "Great grief, I've had enough of this blither. Jackson, go down and get the cop on the corner."

"A policeman, sir? But . . ."

"You heard me. Tell him I want this dame thrown out."

"Yes sir." The butler slid out of the room, thoroughly disturbed.

"I knew, of course, that you were an unprincipled liar, *Monsieur*," said the visitor, finally seating herself, "but I had not expected you to prove yourself a stupid ass as well. Now, shall we get down to the business?"

"Too much business already. Funny business," moaned Chauncey, sitting down too and holding his head. "It *must* be Simon and Schuster."

"Your wit is so acute. So like dear Voltaire's."

"If you'd stop those historical allusions maybe you could get around to telling me why you really came here and what the hell you want."

"Historical delusions brought me here." She sipped the highball and swung a slim foot. "When you stop yelling I shall tell you what I want."

"All right, lady." He did his best to relax. "I submit."

"Naturally." She adjusted that outrageous wig before she continued: "*Bien, Monsieur*. I, la Marquise de Pompadour, have materialized to stop a present injustice and abominations to come. I speak in my own behalf and in that of a great number of illustrious people whom I have the honor to represent."



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"You talk like an agent . . . But why come to me?"

"Because of Miss Farrington's novel." Her eyes became glittering slits. "It is our wish that you stop publication."

"Fat chance," Chauncey mocked her. "It isn't every day that I have a best seller on my hands. *Pompy for Short* will outsell *Amber*, *Anthony Adverse* and *Gone with the Wind* put together."

"*Pompy for Short*" she spat. "Even when Louis was in his cups he daren't have called me by such a ridiculous name. Print that title and you'll curse the day you ever laid eyes on Fern Farrington and her, shall we say, mistresspiece?"

"Who's talkin' about po' li'l me?" quavered a plaintive voice behind them. "Did somebody remember po' li'l Fern?"

Chauncey twisted around in his chair, then clapped his hand to his forehead like the hero of one of the De Witt line of romantic novels. The girl who stood behind them was dressed in a pair of men's awning-striped pajamas which showed each of her blond curves to lavish advantage.

"For God's sake, Fern," he choked. "Where did you find that rig?"

"In youall's dressuh drawuh." She fluffed her short curls. "Spoiled mah dress. Too damn much vermouth in th' Manhattans." She sensed his disapproval. "Have to weah somethin', doan' I? It's cold up heah in th' No'th."

"Shameless hussy," the other woman sniffed. "To forget your hoops!"

"Haven't forgotten 'em." Fern hiccoughed shamelessly. "Who're youall?"

The intruder rose with regal grace.

"You recognize me now, n'est-ce pas?"

"If I were drunk," Fern answered judiciously, "I'd say youall were a moth-eaten copy of Madame Pompadour. Bein' cold sober, I don't know youall from a madam!"

"Pull yourself together, Fern. This lady says she *is* Pompadour and that you have traduced her." Chauncey was beginning to enjoy himself.

"Tsk!" The girl opened her blue eyes to their roundest. "I'd have thought that was more in *yoah* line." Those eyes filled with tears. "Or are youall makin' fun of po' li'l me?"

"I am la Pompadour." The other woman sat down after much adjusting of hoops. "Your maliciously slanderous book will remain unpublished."

"But it ain't malislanderous." Sniffle. " 'Snothin' but the truth. 'S historical. Like Stonewall Jackson." Suddenly Fern fired up. "Too damn disgustin' historical. An' where th' hell youall get that Pompadour stuff? Pompy died



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in, let's see, seventeen-six-hic-ty-four, 'cordin' to John the Walden."

"Every school child knows that!"

"Tha's where youall are wrong. Nobody knows it . . . 'till they read my book. Walden had to dig up th' dates in an ol' library."

"Who is this Walden?"

"He's Fern's researcher," Chauncey cut in.

"Nice ol' John," cooed the well-budded authoress. "Knows everythin' 'bout ol' Pompy. Gave po' li'l me th' stinkin' facts an' I made 'em sing . . . Chauncey, honey, how's about a drink fo' po' li'l . . ."

"Cocotte! You beslimed the facts for your own petty gains!"

"What youall mean, *petty?* With a first edition of half a million."

"Impudent wench!"

"Lissen to whoall's talkin' . . . A dressed-up wreck callin' herself Pompadour. Look at that face. Look at that wig . . . Look at that dress. Just *smell* her. Pfui!" Even as she raged Fern began to crumple. "Aw, get th' hell out!" she wailed. "I'm sick o' listenin' to your nonsense. Sick! My God, *how* I'm sick!" She threw herself on the sofa, weeping hysterically.

"Stop it," Chauncey commanded, bending over her. "Stop it, I say. You're tired. You're upset. It's been a tough day. I'll take care of this impostor. Go in and lie down and rest."

"An' leave youall alone with Pompy's ghost?" Fern gripped the upholstery. "After all, they did call her 'un morceau de roi'. John tol' me that meant 'a piece fit for a king.' Lemme be or I'll . . ."

A crisis was averted when the hall door burst open and a chunky little man in a loud vest charged into the study. He stopped dead as he took in the tableau and rolled the dead stump of a cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"More woman trouble, Chaunce?" he inquired politely.

"'Bout time you got here to help me out of this mess, Bob." The publisher stopped trying to sooth Fern by patting prominent parts of her anatomy. "*Live* women are bad enough."

"Got stuck with that Morris dame," explained his publicity man. "Is *she* a lush. Tried to reach you from I don't know how many phones. They either were out of order or the booth was full of some guy jiggling the hook."

"Out of order?" The publisher's eyes were wild.

"Yeah . . . What's the matter, boss? Did I say something I shouldn't?"

"Haven't you heard? Alexander Graham Bell uninvented the telephone."

"Huh?" Bob's thick eyebrows



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went up. "A gag? I don't get it."

"That's what the woman said." Chauncey pointed. "She said: 'It won't work. Alec Bell just uninvented the telephone.'"

"Looney, huh?" His employee appraised the woman in crinoline who sat smiling secretly, little foot swinging. "Who is she?"

"Says she's Madame Pompadour."

"And I suppose you want me to take *her* home," Bob groaned just as the door opened again to admit a dejected Jackson.

"Well?" Chauncey yelled at him. "Where's that cop?"

"I had not even a modicum of success, sir." The butler bowed his head.

"And why not? Didn't you tell him what was going on?"

"That was just the trouble, sir. I did tell him."

"Then what?"

"When I explained that my master wanted him to evict Madame Pompadour he just grunted. Most embarrassing, sir! When I persisted, he threatened to take me to what he called the hoosegow. It seemed he had read about Pompy in the eighth grade." With skill born of long experience Jackson ducked through the door in time to avoid the highball glass that Chauncey hurled at his greying head.

"I told you that every schoolboy knows about me," said the cause of all this turmoil. "You are mad to publish that book. It will be to laugh."

"You're Pompy?" Bob studied her, rolling his head and his cigar from side to side in unison. "And you don't want Fern's book published? Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy, what a publicity stunt. We'll even get the jump on the Legion of Decency." His heavy face fell. "But we can't use it. It's necrophilism. The women's clubs would crack down on us."

"I'm sleepy, Bob," the publisher yawned. "And Fern has a crying jag on. Won't you get rid of *her?*"

"Come, ma'am," said the publicity man. "I'll run you home."

"It would serve you right if I allowed you to, Monsieur Bob. But I stay here. You conniving robbers must change the title of your book. You must re-write it. And you must make the Publishers' Association swear that, a la avenir, historical characters will be treated with honeur in books, plays, motion pictures, radio and the TV."

"Go on. Go on." Bob cried, dragging pencil and paper out of a breast pocket. "This is rich."

"Making me a strumpet," she stormed, "who hops from bed to bed like a cricket! I *never* had the enjoyment in bed. It was a chore. Louis called me his little sea gull."

"Why, that's just what John



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Walden said," Fern murmured. "But of course I couldn't use it. Imagine, Chauncey! Not having fun in bed. After all, though, Pompy's real name was Poisson. That means fish in French."

"Have you no shame, Fern?" sighed Chauncey.

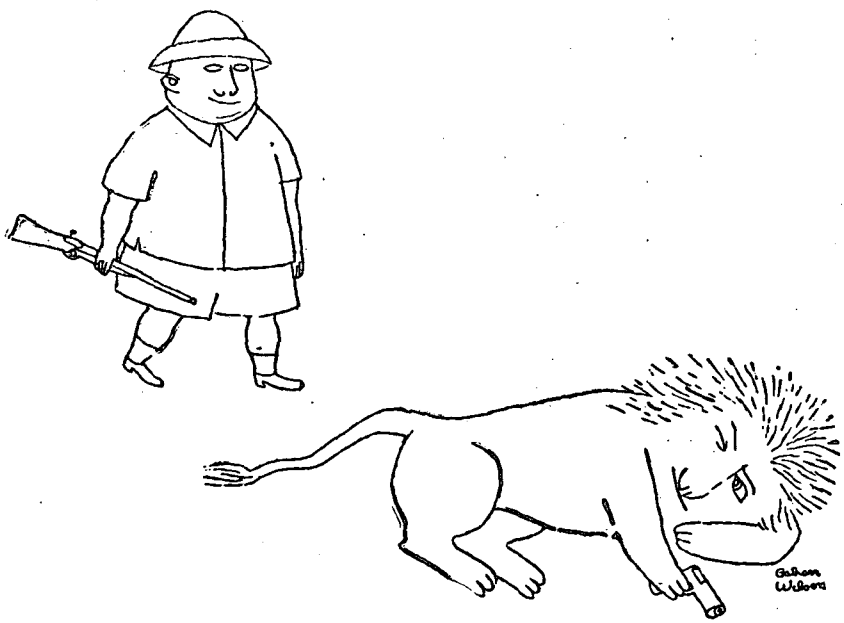
"Not when I'm in New York, honey." She eased her lissome body into a more seductive position and nestled her bright head among the cushions.

"And is there a word about my statesmanship in your pornographic portrayal?" the alleged Pompadour continued her harangue. "No! Not one! Was it pointed out that, if my plans to unite Austria and France against Frederick the Great had succeeded, Germany would have been crushed forever and Hitler never would have emerged to bedevil you moderns? No! Instead, she has me doing a strip, what you call it, tease, in my so lovely theater. Me, la Pompadour, who played demure shepherdesses but always. Bah!"

"Baaaah!" echoed Fern.

"You throw a good line, Madame." Chauncey was at the end of his patience. "But I stand to make a pile of dough on 'Pompy'. Even if you *were* she, I wouldn't change a word in the book. Now what are you going to do? Sue me?"

"More than that," she answered



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imperturbably. "I shall haunt you."

"There's an angle we *can* use," Bob yelped as he shredded the last of his cigar. "Quote: Prominent Publisher Haunted by Ghost of Pompadour. Unquote. With pix! But we'll have to get some decent clothes on you, old girl. Those rags must hail from Cain's theatrical warehouse. And how about a short course at the Du Barry Success School?"

"Du Barry! That creature!" He flinched at the words as though she had raked his face with her fingernails.

"Tout le monde who have been lied about by literary ghouls shall haunt you," she raced on. "Poor little Lucrezia Borgia, who never poisoned even a mouse; who asked only that her lovely hair be shampooed once a week. Nell Gwynn — Cleopatra — Napoleon. All are up in arms. This folie must end. History, it is becoming a sideshow for freaks."

"For God's sake get this madwoman out of here," Chauncey pleaded.

"Gee, boss, she's going good." Bob saw despair in the publisher's eyes and relented. "All right." He gripped her arm. "Come along, my good woman. This has gone far enough."

She shook him off. Drawing herself to her full height, she stared out of the window into far distances. A quivering metallic tone, such as heralds the supernatural on radio and TV, rose and was sustained in the room.

"What do I do now, Ben?" she cried. "They have me cornered, moi."

"A corner in spooks!" Fern marvelled from the divan.

"Quiet. Do not interrupt my friend Ben Franklin." A smile crossed that clownlike makeup. Then it became serious again. As the quivering sound died the woman turned haughtily to face her enemies. "Messieurs and, ah, madamoiselle?" she purred, "we have come to history's turning point. Henceforth truth alone shall prevail . . . in literature a moins."

"Atta baby!" Bob whispered, completely under her spell.

" 'And the truth shall make you free!' " she quoted.

"John, VIII, 32," exclaimed Bob, and received her smile like a rare gift.

"Admitting, for the sake of argument," said Chauncey, "that truth is better, as well as stranger than fiction, what can we do about it at this late date?"

"Start by withdrawing or changing that awful book."

"On the say of a loony who calls herself Madame Pompadour?"

"But I *am!*"

"Prove it," he challenged.

"I can tell you plenty of in-



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timate gossip about Versailles —"

"I made up a lot of that hooey, too," Fern sneered.

"I can show you my likness in the paintings of Boucher."

"You sure don't look like *that* Boucher." Bob pointed toward the fireplace.

"I can bring to my aid other great ones whom the likes of you have maligned."

"Swell." Fern stretched lazily, showing a stretch of creamy midriff. "Bring on your mildewed boy friends."

"Very well, if you insist." Their nemesis hesitated for the first name. "Let us start with . . . with that great American, Thomas Edison —"

"What's *he* bellyaching about?" grumbled Chauncey.

"About those movies, with their sentimentalism . . . those biographies, with their commercialism. Tom has suffered much. Now he will prove that I speak truth by uninventing the incandescent lamp!"

At her last word the study lights went out without even a preliminary flicker. For a moment longer those of Broadway shimmered up through the window. Then they faded, too.

"Jackson!" shouted the publisher. "Light some candles!"

They sat, then, in stunned silence, until the hall door opened with a crash. "Who's that?" Chauncey's voice shook. "Jackson or King Louis?"

"It's Walden," a voice replied. "And did I do plenty of research locating your apartment in this blackout. What's up?"

"Plenty!" Bob lit a cigar and puffed it until it illuminated his scared, pudgy face. "Madame Pompadour is up and haunting us for libel."

"Can't say I blame her after what Fern did with the facts I gave her."

"We're not kidding, John," Chauncey said as Jackson entered with a tray of candles. "We have a loose screw in our midst. She — there she is by the window — she insists she's Pompadour. Wants us to stop publication. Maybe you can make her understand that *you're* Pompadour."

The candles were distributed now, two on the piano and two on the mantel. They revealed the intruder standing serenely beneath the Boucher. Their soft light was just made for the garishness of her makeup. Instead of an ageing, rumpled masquerader, she had taken on the look of youth and cool authority. Fern buried her head in the cushions and howled in helpless fury.

"Well, Monsieur Walden?" The creature looked serenely at the pale, stooped young man who had just entered.

He paced slowly forward, as though bewitched.



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"That dimple," he husked. "The poise of her head. Those hands. That mocking smile — Of course I've gone crazy — but —" He dropped to one knee and kissed her hand reverently. "Madame, your humble servant!"

"My God," Chauncey breathed. "She's beautiful in this light!"

"Beautiful!" Fern bounced off the couch. "Beautiful? That animated bag of graveyard bones? That — that muskox? You dopes can stand around with your jaws hanging down but I won't let her get away with that tripe." Fighting drunk, she crept toward the other woman. "Get out of here this instant, you bitch, before I scratch your bleary eyes out. These men are mine!"

"Oh la, la." Pompadour stood her ground. "Polyandrous, too, Mme. Farrington? And you have perdu your southern accent somewhere."

"Why you — you —"

"Oui. Moi! When I to Versailles came, numerous felines prowled the palace. They did not stay."

"Doan' youall go insultin' po' li'l me. Th' Farringtons o' Virginia —"

"Relax, Fern," John cut her off. "Can't you understand —"

"I can understand there's mayhem to be done. One side!" Fern sprang, long fingernails clawed.

Two steps and she struck a wall. Straining forward from lithe hips, she scrabbled at invisibility.

"Devil!" The fight drained out of her. "Hex!" She dashed for the bedroom in a storm of hysterics.

"What did you do to her?" Chauncey was intrigued. "I'd like to learn that trick."

"*Nous avons de*, what you call, resources." Pompy arranged her hoops and sat down. "Another drink *s'il vous plait*. Je suis un . . . I am a bit *fatigué*."

"Allow me to bring it, Madame." Gallant John followed Jackson from the room.

"You spoke of resources, ma'am," Bob eased forward in a cloud of smoke. "That's what bothers me. You've got too many of them for an authentic eighteenth century spook. You're a time traveller, past tense, aren't you?"

"I don't believe I understand!" Those long hands flew to her throat.

"Oh yes you do," he persisted. "You arrive at the psychological moment, when we're all a bit off-center. You spot Fern's phony accent after we had sweated blood for six months to make it sound right and had fooled every critic in town. You understand telephones and electric lights. Even I know that Pompadour died hundreds of years ago."

"Hundred and ninety, come next April," John amended as he returned with drinks.

"All right. All right. What



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I'm driving at is that Franklin was 'way ahead of his time. He *could* have invented a time machine, I'll bet. Besides, folks don't crawl out of graves."

"Who said anything about graves?" Pompy's laughter tinkled like brook water. "Of course small souls do die and that's an end of them. In fact, many people die years and years before they are buried. You, Monsieur Bob, stand in grave danger of that if you remain a press agent, despite your refreshing knowledge of the Scriptures. But great souls never die."

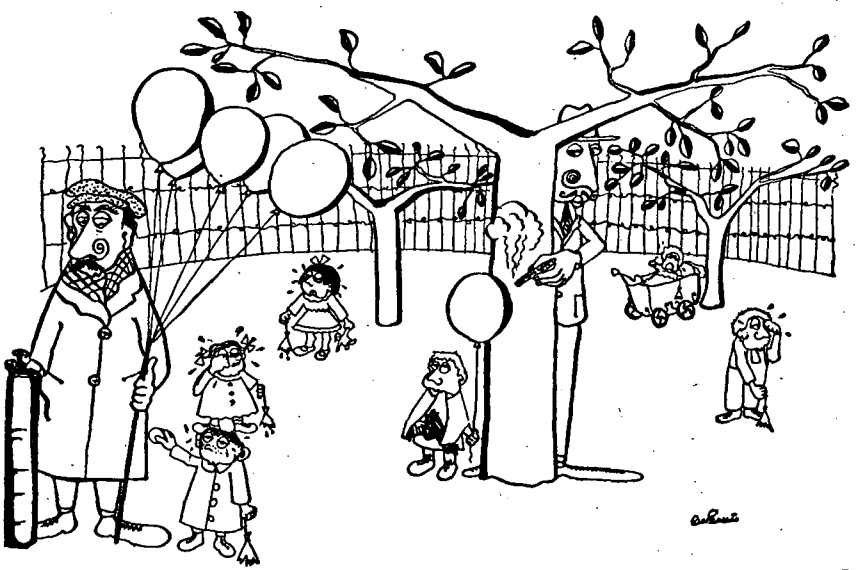
"You do fancy yourself, don't you?" Chauncey managed a grin.

"What does death mean to souls like mine, and Franklin's and Shakespeare's? Poof! Nothing! We go on. We learn. If we have been wicked we suffer. My friend Kit summed it all up by having Mephisto say: 'Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it' when he visited the earth."

"And do *you* suffer, Madame?" John asked.

"*Mon Dieu, non!* Whatever made you think . . . ? Oh, because I was *maîtresse* to a king? But I made him happy, poor thing." She stared at the candle flame for long moments, lost in thought, before adding softly: "I've always wondered whatever became of poor, sad, floundering Louis."

"You stinker, Walden!" Chauncey exploded. "She's talk-





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ing your brand of theosophical mumbo-jumbo. You put her up to this!"

"I wish I had, old fellow," answered the researcher, "but she thought it up all by herself. I did three years of research on Pompadour, so I should know her when I see her."

"*Merci, mon ami.*" Pompy curtsied to him. "One person here has the soul. And now . . ." She sat again and folded her hands primly, ". . . about the book . . ."

"No!" Chauncey pleaded. "This has been fun, in a backhanded way, but I refuse to be coerced, even if you are a genuine, eighteen-karat ghost. The show must go on. Our clamoring public must be fed with dreams, even though the heavens fall."

"I'm not much good at making heavens fall," she said brightly, "but, if you insist . . ."

"Nuts," said Chauncey.

"She did jinx the phones, boss," warned Bob.

"And don't forget the lights." This from John.

"Crazy coincidences. They'll go on any minute now." As Pompy chuckled he added fiercely. "What the hell are you snickering about?"

"Monsier is upset?" She winked at him over her glass. "Un peu . . . ? Non?"

"Of course I'm upset. I have a splitting headache . . ."

"And a split personality, n'est-ce pas?"

"But your shenanigans have nothing to do with it. If you'll all clear out of here and let me have some peace, then maybe . . . Tomorrow . . ."

"This is the time for decision!" Her voice tolled like a bell.

"You are crazy. You are hopped up. If you don't beat it right now, I'll have you arrested." He was on the verge of following Fern into hysteria.

"Hold on, boss." Bob grabbed the publisher's arm. "What if there is something to it? If the phones and lights conked out . . ."

"And you a press agent!" fumed the other. "Can't you see how phony the whole thing is? Let's say those old snorts did want to supress 'Pompy for Short'. Why, then, get Bell and Edison to uninvent things? Why don't they go to the person most directly involved? Why don't they get old man Gutenberg to uninvent printing?"

"We thought of that," said Pompy.

"You what?"

"Ben had the same idea."

"That makes *me* a great soul, too, I suppose. Well . . . ?"

"Gutenberg . . ." She shook her wig sadly, ". . . wouldn't hear of it."

"Naturally," John chimed in. "If you knew Gutenberg . . ."

"A very religious soul," she agreed. "If he uninvented printing, there wouldn't be any Bibles.



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He refused to upset the world's belief."

"Nice of the old boy," Chauncey sniffed.

"Very. As Samuel Pepys says . . ."

" 'And so to bed.' ", the publisher exploded. "That's your exit line, Madame. Scram!" He jumped to his feet, held out his hands.

"Un moment, *s'il vous plait!*" She bent her ungainly wig. A rapt look came over her face and then a smile as the quivering tone rose and fell.

"It's long distance." Bob tossed off his drink.

"*Oui?*" said Pompy to someone unseen. "You are? He has? . . . He will? . . . Magnifique! . . . Adieu."

"That was quick," grinned the press agent. "Rates must be high. What'd he say?"

"*Voici* my ultimatum." She rose, every inch a king's mistress. "Withdraw or rewrite that book. Refuse and I play another card . . . one that will trump all of your aces."

"They play bridge!" Bob sounded awed for the first time.

"Mr. Merganthaler has just agreed to uninvent his linotype." She paused for effect.

"Is *that* all?" Chauncey roared with nervous laughter.

"Holy cats, boss! Don't you get it?" Bob whooped. "If the linotypes go out there won't be a line in the papers tomorrow about Fern's party."

"There won't be any papers," John added in a low, shocked whisper.

"Do proceed." Their torturer was in her element.

"There won't be any 'Pompy' ", Bob raved. "The De Witt Press will be stuck with half a million bound volumes full of blank pages. My hat! There won't be any books at all if the thing is retroactive."

"I withdraw my remarks about the magnitude of your soul, Monseiur Bob." Pompy rose and set her wig at a rougish angle. "You are of the intelligence. But your boss, he is hopeless. And so, bonsoir, messieurs. After us, the deluge."

She tripped to the door, half opened it, and smiled back at them over her slim shoulder as the butler tumbled into the study, ear foremost.

"Stop her, Jackson," cried Chauncey, at last realizing the enormity of his predicament.

"Sorry, sir." Jackson swept the door wide and bowed deeply. "I also am a great soul . . . Your servant, Madame."

The publisher fished blindly in his vest pocket. He dragged out a white handkerchief. He waved it with both hands.

"Pompy," he implored. "I surrender. Pompy, come back!"



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# THE USURPERS

## GEOFF ST. REYNARD

### Illustrated by Leo Summers

*It is possible that aliens walk the earth masquerading as human beings? Jerry Wolfe knew it was true—he had seen them!*

*A needy, hollow-eyed, sharp-looking wretch,*
*A living-dead man.*
*—The Comedy of Errors*

"Brandy in the library, Johnson," I said to the waiter.

I walked through the crowded dining room—it was a Saturday and everyone was in town—and through the huge "mausoleum" with its dozing old men in their deep armchairs dreaming about happier, younger days, and into the library. Selecting one comfortable end of the maroon leather Chesterfield, I sank into its cool depths and wriggled myself into a position from which I could stare at the terrible scar that runs through the east wall, right down from ceiling through bookshelves to cracked marble floor.

I have a sneaking affection for that dreadful eyesore. It was made by a dud bomb, just a little fellow, who burrowed his way down through our club in the darkest days of the London blitz—and although he utterly spoiled our sets of Dickens, Scott, Meredith, and Hardy, and pulverized seven volumes of The Decline And Fall, not to mention obliterating a first edition of one of Keats' things, I forget which—well, I shall be sorry indeed when the Gloucester Club finally gets around to repairing the damage he did. The ugly swath he cut reminds me of the War, you see. Oh, I've no nostalgia for it! As any normal man must, I loathe and abominate war. But in those days I had a dozen friends who are gone now; I had comradeship and a high courageous good humor all about me; and I had my left arm, instead of a sleeve which I must pin to the front of my coat every morning. When I look at the scar of the little dud, I can hear the ghosts of laughter and of jests cracked in the face of Hell's own fire; I can hear Johnny Kildane's voice saying, "Ruddy good barrage the Huns are gettin' tonight"—and Art Millan's

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answering drawl, "Please Jove they'll hang about till we can get up there on their tails!"

I suppose it's much the same sort of thing those old duffers in the "Mausoleum" remember as they gaze like so many mummies at the huge portraits of generals and admirals who were already legends when I was born. From the expressions on some of their withered faces, I imagine they can even smell the powder and the smoke drifting over the battlefields . . . Lord! We old soldiers are a dreamy lot.

Johnson drifted in bearing a great breather glass with a wee puddle of brandy in the bottom. I warmed it with my hands and sighed a little as I thought about—what I thought about.

And then Jerry Wolfe came into the library, or at any rate, his ghost did. He, or it, came straight over and dropped down on the Chesterfield beside me, and as well as I could with one arm I pressed him or it, to my chest and made loud noises of disbelief.

I say "ghost" for two reasons: one, I had thought he was long since dead and buried; and two, he looked as though he'd just taken out a long-term lease on a marble tomb and was about to move in. Haggard, greying at the temples, his eyes sunken, his suit torn and dirty, he looked positively ghastly.

Nevertheless, it was really old Jerry, and I beat him on the back and crowed happily, much to the horror of the older members seated near us.

"Wolfe, you flea-covered sun-baked, lousy old relic of a bygone day, how the flaming hell are you?" I yammered.

The ghost grinned, with just a faint touch of the old Wolfe gaiety, and said, with more feeling than I'd ever heard put into the words before, "Alec, old horse, you are a sight for sore eyes. But please don't advertise my presence so loudly, will you?"

Johnson materialized at my elbow. I gave him the high sign for a bottle of Scotch, and with a grave nod he faded again. "Jerry," I said happily, "I thought you'd got it years ago."

He gave me a lopsided and feeble imitation of the justly celebrated Wolfe smile, and said, "Well, it hasn't been years, but I've had it."

Then before I could hem and haw and ask him what he meant, Johnson came up, apparently through the floor, with a bottle of the best and a siphon on a tray with a couple of glasses. I splashed about five fingers into a glass, dampened it slightly with soda, and passed it to Wolfe, who looked as if he needed it. When we were alone again, he leaned back against the maroon leather and stared into his drink as though it had been a crystal ball.

"Alec Talbot, you one-armed paperhanger, you are a veritable sight for sore eyes," he repeated. Then he took a sip that would have drowned a medium-sized rhinoceros, and was silent.

He was still a handsome big man, was Jerry Wolfe, as he sprawled there on the Chesterfield beside me in his worn blue suit; lean, just-tanned-enough face, small mustache, long rangy body, he looked precisely



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like the man I had last seen at Dunkirk, years upon years ago . . . . And yet there were the differences. His eyes, for one thing. His grey hair. And his face was somber—not exactly sullen, but without the faintest trace of happiness in it. I leaned closer and squinted at his sunken eyes. They were a cool ice-blue, as they'd always been, and all around them were little short dashes of pink-white scars, like tiny hen-tracks, running clean across the bridge of his nose and scattering out from his eyes toward the ears.

"You've caught one," I said.

Ruefully he touched a finger to his eyebrow. "We were playing the silly-mad asses with some old Tower muskets we'd found in a secret cache near Peshawar," he said. "It was shortly before we vacated India. We were almost the last to leave. Some fool—you know him, and I won't tell you his name—let off one of them at a Rampur hound that was lolloping past. We were all fairly tight, so there was some excuse. Well, I was standing just beside it, the muzzle of the musket I mean, and the flash took me spang across the eyes. They were in a bandage when we left India. The medico took them off on the boat comin' back."

"So you've been in India," I said.

"Five years."

"I'd thought you were dead. Most of our old gang is, you know."

"All the better for them," said he cryptically. "Pour me another, will you, Alec?"

I sloshed him out another half-pint, put a spray of soda on the surface. "I don't know," I said reflectively. "I've lost a flipper, but I'm glad to be around even so. The sun still shines once a month."

"Listen to me, old hound," said Jerry Wolfe, fixing me with those sunken, scarred, hypnotic ice-blue eyes. "I'm going to tell you my yarn, must tell it to you, and when I'm done you'll either curse me for a maniac, or damn me for telling you what no man on the earth should know. I don't want to tell you, you understand, but I *must* tell someone, as the man always says before he spiels his little speech; and you're the first and only candidate I've met whom I *could* tell. And it's vital. So frightfully vital."

"Haven't you seen any of our boys at all till now?" I asked, feeling pretty uncomfortable at his queer words. "Kinkaid's in town somewhere, and—"

"Kinkaid," said Jerry, looking as if the name put a dark brown taste into his mouth. "I've seen him. Couldn't very well tell *him*."

"Well, go ahead, old chap," I said, thinking it couldn't be as bad by half as he was looking, and that it was probably some deep dark sin that he'd brooded on till it got out of proportion. "Let's have it."

"All right, Alec, and forgive me in advance, will you?"

"For what, Jerry?"

"For spoiling your sleep for the rest of your life," said he, and after another long drink he went on to tell me his story.

*I could a tale unfold whose lightest word*
*Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,*



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*Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,*
*Thy knotted and combined locks to part,*
*And each particular hair to stand on end*
*Like quills upon the fretful porpentine.*

*—Hamlet*

The day they took off the bandages (he said) was a wonderfully balmy day in midocean. The sun was hot, but not too much so, and the little sea breezes were all around the ship, and every so often you could hear the gulls squawk.

My eyes had been burnt, as well as the flesh around them, and for a while they'd despaired of my eyesight, but now the doctor thought I'd be as well as ever, barring that I might have to wear glasses.

I lay on my bed in the cabin, while the doctor and his nurse puttered with the many thicknesses of gauze which bound my head. Gradually the world, which had been pitch dark for months and months, began to grow lighter; I fidgeted with the covers under me—I was lying on top of them, fully dressed for barring my eyes I was of course perfectly fit—and I thought they'd never get the beastly things off.

As though I'd been on the bottom of a dark lake, and was now swimming toward the surface, things shimmered out of obscurity; a dark shape above me was the doctor, busily unwinding . . . a round light glowing off to the left was the porthole . . . a blur on the right was the nurse. Another layer came off, and my world grew even clearer. And then, the final strip of gauze went peeling away, and I could see.

The first thing my eyes drank in—they were thirsty for sight after the ages of blindness—was the dear old doctor bending over me, so much anxiety written on his big white face that you'd have thought I was his own son. I grinned and grabbed him by the shoulders as I lay there. "You worked it! I can see," I yelled.

Relief spread over his features. He straightened up.

I took a look at the porthole. Sky, blue sky. You've no notion what a miraculous thing the sky is.

"I'm a dervish if I think I'll even need glasses," I said.

"Is there any pain from the light?"

"Not one jolly iota," I said, turning my head to look at the nurse.

I looked at her.

At first there was no reaction, none at all. I just lay there looking at the nurse, feeling no pain, feeling no fear, feeling no sensation whatever. I just looked, suspended as it were in a great void somewhere in the vacuum of space, outside comprehension.

She had three heads.

The one on the left was rather like that of a human being, excepting that it had a number of ears all over the forehead, and there wasn't any mouth that I could see. The one on the right was a perfect reproduction of one of those silly little things we used to see in drops of water in bio class—amoebas, I think you call 'em. The middle one was far too horrid to describe. It had tentacles in the center. The body of the creature was a curious amorphism, running to limbs where there shouldn't be any, its outline changing from minute to minute as the thing mov-



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ed. The triple heads were fairly constant. Vaguely I could see that within or behind its horrible writhing shape was that of a woman; a white-uniformed nurse.

I can sit here and describe the creature coldly and clearly like this because of what I've seen since. At the moment all I could do, when the paralysis wore off and I realized what I was seeing, was throw my head back and scream, and scream, and scream . . . .

And all the while, as I tore my throat out with the screaming, I was realizing somewhere deep inside my brain that this—this being, this monster, was the nurse, and that to the doctor and to everyone else she looked like an utterly normal person, a girl in a white starched uniform who was probably rather pretty. I don't know how I knew it. I just knew. Perhaps it was my Irish blood, givin' me the second sight. I realized at once that I was the only soul who could see her like that, and it was because something had been done to my eyes by that flash of powder months before.

And I also knew then, somehow, as clear as though my great-grandmother, who was a witch in an Irish bog, had whispered it in my ear, that what I saw was a mild beginning for what I would presently see. Don't ask me how; I *knew*.

When my lungs had spent themselves and my throat was raw, I lay there and stared at the horrified doctor. He was so blessed human. He was so real, so ordinary.

"Sorry," I murmured hoarsely. "Hysterics. Rotten nerves, I suppose. Inexcusable."

I felt that, whatever happened, I didn't dare let *her* know that I could see her as she was.

How did I know that my eyes weren't playing tricks, that I wasn't seeing a phantasm of my own imagining? I don't know, but I was sure that the revolting being with the three heads was masquerading as a person, and that I mustn't let her know I'd found out her secret.

When I got hold of myself I took another look at her. Behind her true structure I could still see, as in a glass darkly, y'know, the figure of a nurse in white. It was as though the surpassingly ugly chunk of protoplasm was shimmering in front of a real woman, and its body was just transparent enough to enable me to see her behind it.

The head on the left, the one that was a kind of travestied human noggin, was looking at me speculatively. It wondered. It thought, and by heavens I could *feel* its cold slimy, inhuman, horrible thought, that perhaps I had better be looked into. I strove with the rebellious muscles of my face and produced for her what must have been the prize sickly smile of the year.

"Hello, nurse," I said.

"You're tired," said a girl's voice solicitously. "You'd better rest. If the doctor wants me to stay here—"

"Oh, no!" I yelled. "No, I want to go up on deck. I want to see people and, er, things."

"If you think you're all right, old man," said the doctor kindly. "I could have Miss Jones stay here with you, though."

"Oh, no, no, I want to go on deck," I babbled earnestly. "Really." Miss



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Jones! Merciful heavens! Miss Jones! That thing!

I staggered up and went out on deck. There were a number of people in lounging chairs and two figures playing shuffleboard up the deck a little way. I lurched to the rail and clung to it like grim death.

One of the shuffleboarders was a vast unwieldy purple blotch, with greenish speckles all over it, and half a dozen eyes on stalks waving in the air. The other was all shiny and silver, its scales or plates or whatever they were caught the light and reflected it brightly, and it looked something like a shark and something like a side of beef. That's as near as I can come to a description of it.

Of the twelve or fourteen people sprawled on deck chairs, about seven were human beings. The others—ugh!

I turned with a spasmodic jerk and stared off toward the gently swelling horizon. I have no conception of how long I stood there. It may have been as much as three or four hours. A flight of gulls was all I saw, and they, thank God, were nothing but gulls, grey and white and broad-winged and beautiful.

When finally I turned from the rail I had come to a couple of decisions. I have not changed any of them since that day. I feel that I was right about the whole affair, impossibly, incredibly correct; I think, although there were many conclusions I might have come to, that I hit on the right one instinctively.

In the first place, it wasn't my eyes. I mean they weren't playing tricks on me. What I was seeing was there, had always been there, was a real and concrete as—as this bottle of Scotch whiskey. It was just that something had happened to my eyes. Some amazing freak wrought by the powder in that old Tower musket, some searing and reshaping of the pupils or corneas or whatever the devil it was, had twisted my vision into another dimension. Is that the term I want? Perhaps it is, and then again, perhaps it isn't; I was never one of your bookish johnnies. In each of these monstrosities I could see dimly what the human form was—see it as though the beast stood in front of the man and only partially obliterated him—and still with terrible clarity I could see the horrendous and unbelievable actuality.

I call it "the beast". That's for want of a better word. They aren't animals. They aren't people, although they've taken on the superficial look, and smell, and feel, of people. They are nothing for which we have a name. They are—they.

The "nurse" may have had a suspicion concerning my new gift of sight, but she couldn't be sure at all; and I would have to be frightfully circumspect in the future. I somehow got the feeling that if they knew I could see them they'd eliminate me at once. There was some sort of huge, cosmic secret abroad, which they were keeping to themselves. It was like a gargantuan masquerade party where half the revelers were alien beings, hiding their otherworldliness behind grinning masks.

Why, you may well ask, didn't I conclude that my eyes were playing practical jokes? Why, after such a close shave as my accident had been,



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wasn't it quite logical that my eyes would play me the same sort of deceitful tricks they sometimes play when a chap's had too much to drink?

I *knew*, Alec. There was a horrid cold emanation from these beings, a pulsing radiation, a fearfulness, a malignity of death's own breathing, which I felt clearly when I saw them; no eye-strain, eye-trick, or eye-fault could have given me those outside butterflies in my belly.

Well. What was I to do about it all?

Absolutely nothing. What could I do? Could I take the doctor aside and say to him seriously, "Old man, I'd like you to know that your nurse has three heads?"

Scarcely.

Could I tap the silver shark-thing on its "shoulder" and say coyly, "Ah, old chap, don't let me spoil your game of shuffleboard, but can I see your scales?"

Not unless I wanted to end up in an institution—or in the depths of the rolling green sea!

And speakin' of drinks and D.T.s, as I was a minute ago, do you know I believe that some of us can see them when we're drunk? Really howling tight, I mean; with alcohol bubbling in our ears and coursing through us. I think it does something to our dimension-sense, and dimly, faintly, we perceive what beasts are all about us. A little theory I've come around to, in the long winter evenings—let it pass. But next time a fellow has the delirium tremens and swears there's an ogre in the room, *don't laugh at him*. He may be right.

To get on with it. I turned from the rail, trying hard not to shriek at the sight of a greyish blob of greasy muck that was floating by on the arm of a handsome young Navy officer, and made for my cabin. I locked myself in—I had a notion that bolts and bars kept *them* out as effectively as though they'd been people, and eventually it turned out that I was right—and I flung myself down on my bed to think.

What to do? Nothing, nothing, nothing. It rang in my skull like a giant tocsin. There was not a thing in the world, the mad, horrible, soul-shattering world, that I could do about them. Except lie low, turn them a smiling countenance, and think for all I was worth. Be calm, be natural, and think, think, *think!*

After a little the nurse-beast came and tapped gently on my door. "Mister Wolfe," it called softly. "Mister Wolfe—Jerry?"

Oh, ye saints and godlings, it was going to try and seduce me! That smooth, silky voice, and that demonic body; heaven and hell! I think it suspected, and wanted to prove itself wrong. No man who had ever seen it in its true shape could have embraced the nurse-form within it. Talk about acid tests . . . !

Swiftly I thought. If I could put it off until night, perhaps I could—no, every nerve and muscle and bit of flesh and drop of blood in my body would have screeched aloud against such a ghastly union, even if darkness hid the beast-thing from my warped sight. Whether it grew suspicious or not, I must put it off. For good.

"I'm tired," I said to the door.



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"Terribly tired, and I just want to read. Tell the doctor I'll see him tomorrow, please."

There was a scuffle and a kind of ladylike growl of anger, and the creature went away. I sighed and collapsed.

My words had given me an idea, and in a moment I went to my bookshelf and got down my Shakespeare. Crushing out of my mind the question as to whether the Bard himself had been human or not, I flipped the pages idly, pillowing my head on my arm and trying to lose myself in the splendid poetry. Almost at once I found Hamlet crying out, "Oh, woe is me, to have seen what I have seen, see what I see!"

With a shudder that shook my body like an ague I turned to *King Richard III*. I began at the first of it and in fifteen minutes or so I had succeeded in putting my dilemma into the rear of my mind. The beast-world faded . . .

*What in God's name was I reading?*

*Oh, I have passed a miserable night,*
*So full of ugly sights, of ghastly dreams,*
*That, as I am a Christian faithful man,*
*I would not spend another such a night,*
*Though 'twere to buy a world of happy days.*

*So full of dismal terror was the time! . . .*
*What sights of ugly death within mine eyes!*
*Methought I saw a thousand fearful wrecks;*
*A thousand men that fishes gnawed upon . . .*
*With that, methought, a legion of foul-fiends*
*Environ'd me, and howled in mine ears*
*Such hideous cries that, with the very noise,*
*I trembling waked, and for a season after*
*Could not believe but that I was in hell,*
*Such terrible impression made my dream.*

With a sob I hurled the bulky volume violently against the cabin wall, and lay there staring at the ceiling cursing at fate, at myself, and at the beast-things. Why had I not been blinded? Why hadn't the antique musket exploded and killed me for good and all, instead of throwing me alive into one of the deepest and foulest pits of Hell that man could ever have imagined?

If there are any gods in the cosmos, may they forgive the black lie I told the poor old doctor! I said I was a misogynist, a neurotic womanhater. I asked him to tell his nurse she was not needed in my case any longer, and to leave her behind when he visited my cabin to treat my rapidly healing eyes. He nodded understandingly. I remained in my cabin throughout the voyage, and saw no more of the beast-people.

*Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible*
*To feeling as to sight? or art thou but*
*A dagger of the mind, a false creation,*
*Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?*



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*. . . . I have supp'd full with horrors.*

*—Macbeth*

When we docked I of necessity stood in line with the other passengers to disembark, shuddering uncontrollably at the touch of various gruesome entities as they lurched against me. They appeared to take a perverse delight in touching me. Of course it was imagination. They couldn't have known about my eyes. But it did seem that nine out of ten people who brushed by me were the outre outsiders.

If my sense of touch had been altered with my eyesight, I doubt whether I could have kept my reason. To feel those slimy-looking tentacles fingering my face; to touch the revolting greenish-blue sides of a man that resembled a lobster on wheels; to have the dead-alive blobs of fingers looking like earthworms entwined in mine, and to feel them, as one of the beat-creatures, appearing slightly drunk, shook hands with everyone on board! But everything felt as it always had. The silver shark-creature who stumbled against me felt warm and smelled of violets, just as a pretty girl might have done. The earthworms, when I shut my eyes involuntarily, were so many good strong fingers. No, only my sight was affected. It was a large mercy in the midst of a shattering terror that was turning my hair steadily greyer and greyer.

You know I've always loved music above everything else. When I had established myself in my old diggings in town, I phoned for three tickets to a symphony concert that was being presented that night. Three tickets, of course. The seat in the middle for myself, a vacant chair on either side. I couldn't have endured rubbing elbows cozily with a blob of ectroplasm.

I had dinner in my rooms—the waiter was a very human old Cockney—and just before curtain time I drove down town in a hired car and went into the hall, and down the dark aisle to my seats.

Music hath charms to soothe, eh?

But not when the conductor grips his podium with seven or eight octopus arms, and waves the baton in a monstrous hand like a great black spider! Not when the drummer, who to everyone else is a jolly fat man, is to yourself nothing but a vast mauve splotch of flickering foggy matter, sending out arms and legs whenever he feels like it to beat his percussion instruments first with one and then another! Not when—but why go on?

I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth. I would have to get used to it. I had years and years, probably, in which to live among these nightmares. (Curiously, the idea of suicide had never entered my head.) And gradually the wonderful music stole over my tormented soul, and I forgave the fact that the leader was so grossly inhuman, and I breathed easier than I had since the bandages were stripped from my blighted eyes.

When the lights went up at intermission I looked around me. Pure force of habit. One does look about one when the lights go up.

Merciful powers of good and evil!



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What a congregation! The less said, the better by far.

But just across the vacant seat to my left sat Marion Black, blessedly real and human, pretty as a summer sky and looking to my poor tormented eyes like the gates of Paradise. With a glad, if far too loud, cry, I attracted her attention.

"Marion!" I shouted. "By Jove, Marion, old girl!"

"Jerry Wolfe!" she said, with that wonderful smile of hers that lights up a room like a sunburst. "Where have you been for the last decade?"

It hadn't been ten years, but it had been a very long time indeed. I moved over beside her, assured myself that she was alone, and began to jabber eighty to the minute. She must have thought me slightly tight.

As the house lights began to dim, "Let's get out of here and go have a real talk," I said. "I'm sick of the spider—I mean of the music."

Back in the primeval ages before the war I'd been engaged to Marion, until I'd seen Jennifer Tregennis one afternoon . . . I should have felt like a cad at this meeting with Marion, but I didn't. And she was still, I think, in love with me. We rose and brushed over people's knees (I didn't look at them, I was terrified to do so), and left the hall. We got into my car and I drove to my apartment.

When she had a highball in her hand and I was seated at her feet in front of the fire, "Marion," I said, "how in the devil have you been? What have you been doing? How are—"

"How's Jenn these days, Jerry?" she asked me. Not cattily, or meanly, but because she wanted to know.

"I—I don't know. Haven't seen her yet. I just struck town today."

"I thought you were engaged?"

"I suppose we are, after a fashion."

"Then why all this?" She gestured vaguely.

"Dash it all, I wanted tonight with you, to talk with you!" I said. "I meant to spend it alone, but running into you like that . . . Fate, and all that." She laughed at my intentionally trite expression.

So we talked. We could always talk splendidly, Marion and I. We yarned away for several hours. Naturally, I said nothing about my affliction, was forgetting it entirely, until she asked about the scars around my eyes. Then the whole tale came out. All by itself, you know. No volition on my part.

At first she thought I was drunk. Then I saw the clouds of doubt gathering behind her lovely eyes, and at last I stopped, realizing that I had just proven myself irrevocably mad in her eyes.

"Jerry," she faltered, after I'd stared at her for a minute or two, and I could feel pain in her tones, "Jerry old fellow, this accident you mentioned . . ."

I stood up. I was terribly weary, bone-weary.

"Marion," I said, "I'm sorry I'm going to get stinking. I'll drive you home."

She kissed me as I opened the car door for her at her apartment house. It seemed to me a sort of motherly,



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oh-you-poor-wounded-boy kiss. I shot back through town like a bat out of a furnace, and called Jenn.

While I waited for her I made myself some highballs. They were pretty average powerful ones. I was going to tell my story to Jenn. Twice in a night; pretty tough. But I had to see if Jenn would believe me. If she didn't—well, I was alone in a world of blind idiots and terrible, unimaginable beast-things.

Jenn had plenty of brains. Jenn was tall and dark and smooth and sleek, like a gorgeous great otter. Jenn wore clothes in the way every woman wishes she could. Jenn was the most beautiful object I had ever seen in my life. Marion was as lovely as a star, but Jenn was as stunning as a fiery comet.

There was a light tap on the door. I went over, weaving somewhat, and threw it open.

On the threshold stood a seven-foot globule of dusky orange, shot with sickly pink lights. There were some eyes on stalks, and some arms and things. I was getting pretty used to them by now. There was a beak. It opened.

"Hello, Jerry darling," said Jenn.

*And when he falls, he falls like Lucifer,*
*Never to hope again.*
*—King Henry VIII*

After I had gone to bed I lay awake and sweated. I shook and shuddered, the cold perspiration running over me, and I wondered: Now will *they* know? When I slammed that door in the Jenn-thing's face—"face!"—did I give the whole ruddy show away?

What will *they* do? Will they gather somewhere, a Ladies Home Sewing Circle, or a Literary Club, or a Smoker, or some other innocent assemblage, and discuss my fate?

Or . . .

Do *they* know one another? Can they tell who is one of the elect and who is a poor devil of an unsuspecting human being?

Of course they know. Hadn't I seen them talking to each other on shipboard, writhing their tentacles and mouthing unheard noises through orifices that substituted in them for mouths? And if through my freak accident I could see them, couldn't they naturally see one another? They were so obviously an alien race; *they* knew who was who!

And what would they do to me now?

Well, all they could have thus far was a suspicion. But certainly anything that looked like *they* did would have no compunction about liquidating one poor mortal, even if only on suspicion. There seemed little doubt that I was now in deadly danger.

It's often seemed to me that I was born in danger, grew up in constant danger, and have indeed known very few times when I wasn't in that precarious state. What with border wars in India, the blitz here, and various other fiascos, it's been a hectic life. But never, never did mortal man find himself in such a deadly, hideous danger as that in which I now wallowed.

Even if I wasn't known to them



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yet as a see-er, I soon would be unless I accustomed myself soon to going about among them with a straight face. I should have to deal with them, eat and drink with them, perhaps—God help me!—the nurse-thing had shown me that perhaps I should even have to make love to one of them. Either that or become a hermit. Or die. Or blind myself.

Yes, I even toyed with that notion!

Morning came at last, bringing no relief and no solution.

I arose and dressed wearily. My faculties were beginning to grow numb with the strain. I thought of going to Marion and retelling my story slowly, in the full light of day, slower this time, with more corroborating details . . . But I had no corroborating details!

As I ran a comb through my hair there was a knock on my door. I went into the sitting room and put my hand on the knob. Then a thought struck me. Hastily I tiptoed to my closet, opened it, and removed the coat that matched my trousers. I also took a heavy topcoat and an almost-new felt hat which would stand a lot of hard wear. As the knock was repeated I slid silently into my bedroom and flung them on the bed. Bad luck throwing a hat on a bed? As if one more ounce of bad luck mattered to me!

From a drawer I selected my heaviest muffler. The knocking crescendoed through the flat. "Half a mo'," I shouted, trying to sound sleepy. "Just puttin' my trousers on."

I laid the muffler and a pair of heavy leather gloves on the topcoat. From my dresser I took my compact little shaving kit and a few toilet articles. I crammed them all into the topcoat pockets. I got out my revolver, a heavy .45, and slipped it into my coat also, with the dozen rounds of ammunition I had left. Hastily, my hands shaking ever so slightly, I filled my old silver flask to the brim from a bottle of brandy I had fortuitously bought the day before; the bottle itself being too bulky to carry inconspicuously. I added a pair of heavy socks and a couple of handkerchiefs to the trove in my coat, and as a final item, the reason for which I could only dimly conceive, a small but fairly powerful pocket telescope.

Then, shouting something inane to pacify the waiter-at-the-door, I tore off my white shirt—literally tore it off, even though it was new—and as buttons went spinning about the floor I stuffed the ripped remains in a drawer and hustled myself into a good heavy flannel hunting shirt. Knotting a tie hurriedly, and giving a last swift glance at the things on the bed, I shut the bedroom door behind me and walked across the sitting room.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door. Trying not to see what was there, I grinned "Come in," I said.

*They* came in. There were three of them. With the closed door at my back I put everything I had into a hearty smile and stuck out my hand. It went through a blob of intangible yellow oozing stuff, but I didn't wince. I felt my hand shaken in a good tight grip.

Concentrating harder than I ever had before, I stared without seeming to stare at the one who held my hand. I found that by momentarily



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forgetting the grisly shape of the creature I could see the man "inside" it pretty plainly. I had never tried to do it before. I recognized this one at once. It was Jack Kinkaid.

"Hallo, boy," I said.

"Cheero, Jerry!" said the Kinkaid-beast. "What, no khaki?"

"Oh, I'm out of the service, Jack," I said easily. "Accident, y'know. My eyes—"

I should never have let that slip. The great yellow monster turned quite orange with interest. "Oh, your eyes?" it said with deep surprise, either real or very well feigned.

"Yes," I said shortly. "Sit down, won't you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, old man. This is Bill Tregennis. And—" he mentioned some other prosaic name, but I didn't catch it.

"Tregennis?" I said. "Any relation to Jennifer?"

"Cousin," said the Tregennis-thing.

"Sit down," I said again, having nothing else to say. What does one say to three hydra-headed bogiemen?

I knew they'd come about Jenn. I knew she'd told her cousin at once, the night before, and here was the delegation to see what was up. On the human side, all well and good. Very natural that a girl's relative should come round to see the bounder of a fiance who had slammed a door in her face. And in its subtler implications? A select party of three of the monsters sent up by Lord knew what Central Council, to discover if there was danger from a possible slip somewhere . . .

Think how often it must happen! Think how many untoward accidents they must investigate! Think how they must be on guard every second against just such a freak as I'd become, one who could see them! Only think how many poor devils who've given way to some impulse without reason must be catechized by a pack of these evil spirits!

And now they had really found one who knew. I didn't dare let them discover that fact. But how in the world could I keep them from it?

I could only try.

"I have a vague recollection of being frightfully stinko last night and calling up Jenn," I smirked fatuously, giving them the man-to-man business. "I'm glad she didn't take me seriously."

"But she did," said the Tregennis ghoul. "She came up here."

"But my word, she didn't." I protested.

"You slammed the door in her face. With a shriek," it added thoughtfully.

"Judas Priest, I must have been blotto," I said lamely.

"You must have been heartily blotto," agreed Kinkaid, standing in front of my mantelpiece. "I say, Jerry old thing, about your eyes . . ."

I turned to stare at him, and dropped headlong into the trap. Before my bulging eyeballs he puffed himself up, swelled, turned from yellow to a vivid scarlet, shot out tentacles to within an inch of my face, made his "mouth" a gaping scarlet well that led deep down into the flaming pits of Malebolge.

I am only human.

"Stop that!" I screamed. "Don't do that, you—"



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The other two were on their feet at once. "Don't do what?" asked Kinkaid's big voice solicitously, while his actual shape subsided into its now-familiar yellow formlessness.

"Don't tap your foot like that," I said, thinking faster than I ever had on the battlefield. "I've got the great-grandfather of all mornings-after, laddie."

Naturally they were far from satisfied. I saw *them* speak to each other, waving their tentacles in excited colloquy, while the man-shapes stood and stared at me. They were preparing another test, of course. With all the calmness I could muster I got out of my chair and headed for the bedroom. One of them, I think the Tregennis-beast, came over and stood in my path. My hands turned cold and wet and my stomach contracted into a sick ball.

"Where are you going?" it asked.

I saw out of the tail of my eye the Kinkaid-thing speak sharply, if inaudibly, to my fiancee's cousin. Evidently it said, "Don't be so obvious, you idiot!" because Tregennis fell back rather disconcertedly.

"Goin' to fix myself a bromo," I said, as if surprised. "D'you mind?" I added, with sarcasm.

"Of course not, sorry," it muttered.

I went into the bedroom and tried to look as if I always closed the door behind me when I took a bromo. I put my fingers around the key and as slowly as possible—and with tremendous care to be silent—I turned it till it would turn no further.

I waited a second or two. I had no ideas then of the beasts' capabilities. I thought it distinctly possible that they might be able to see through wood. If they could, they'd be after me in a flash. Nothing stirred in the sitting room. I let out a sigh of relief.

Swiftly and smoothly I pulled on the coat. I put on the hat and then the muffler. I shrugged into the topcoat with its load of valuables, slid the silver flask into my inside pocket, and as quietly as I could I opened the window. It gave directly onto a fire escape. I climbed out.

Twenty steps down the rusting-iron stairway I suddenly recollected that in my top drawer was a considerable sum of money. I would need every cent I could get—I turned right around and flew back up the steps.

I could hear them talking in the next room. Then Kinkaid's voice, raised in query: "I say, Jerry, are you taking a bath in the stuff?"

"With you in a minute," I shouted, to cover the noise of my bureau drawer coming open. I grabbed the little stack of bills and hared out onto the fire escape again as the Tregennis-gorgon yelled something. I didn't stop to answer. I took the fire escape three steps at a time.

*Between the acting of a dreadful thing*
*And the first motion, all the interim is*
*Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream . . .*
*. . . the state of man,*
*Like to a little kingdom, suffers then*
*The nature of an insurrection.*
*—Julius Caesar*

By the time my feet touched the alley I knew where I was going.



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There was no rhyme nor reason to my choice, it just popped into my head. I took a taxi, the second one I saw because the first was driven by one of *them*, and in a short time I was inside Charing Cross Station.

I sat down on one of the benches and then the situation really caught up with me. Shaking as though I had blackwater fever, I sat and moaned to myself. Finally I dragged into the men's room and took a long pull at my flask. Then I went back to the bench, somewhat revived.

So far, so good. Or at any rate, so far, so safe. I had given Kinkaid the slip; and besides him, the two monsters with him, Jenn, Marion, and perhaps a dozen people more or less, no one in London these days knew me from Methusaleh. But *they* would have discovered my getaway by now, and undoubtedly the hue and cry was on.

I sat there and watched the men and women and the beast-people shuffle past. I began to notice smaller things about them now that I was growing used to their eerie forms.

For one thing no two seemed to be made in the same pattern. Each one was an individual. Here was a monstrous snake-like being humping along, there ran a brown demon-toad all covered with red warts.

I've been using prosaic terms to describe them. That's because we have no words for what they really look like. When I say shark and spider and octopus and toad, I'm grasping at the nearest analogy I know. They don't honestly look like sharks and spiders, octopi and toads. They look like nothing on earth or in Hell. If there was suddenly a brand-new color, a new primary color, what would you call it, how would you describe it? It's the same way with these shapeless, nevertheless shaped things. They are literally indescribable.

The nearest approach I can make to a description is that they look like amoeba and protozoa gone wild. But that's not it either. They all seem to be able to throw out pseudopods or tentacles or what-have-you, but they always return to their own lovely shape afterward. I—I don't know. It's an awful job telling about them.

Another thing I noticed while I was sitting there. I could see a multitude of faint lines, running parallel to each other, stretching out from them for a short distance. These lines usually ran at an angle of about forty-five or fifty degrees, and were bluish-silver. I wondered about them for a long time. They didn't seem to change at all when the beast-things moved. They were always there, as a kind of background to the horrid shapes, running out into nothingness about two or two and a half feet from the body.

Background, that was the key word. I believe that the lines are a part of their dimension. The accident to my eyes had given me the range of these beings, these nightmares, but apart from the devils themselves I couldn't see into their dimension, if dimension it is. Excepting for these lines.

I think—if you'll excuse this theorizin' by a very unscientific mind—I think that the human bodies are the focal points of the



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beast-creatures, and that my warped vision could spot the hobgoblins only because of their connection with the human bodies. In other words, the body which the beast has either stolen, occupied, or been born into, is the focusing point between our dimensions. This other place, the one where they normally live, and which is composed so far as I could see of straight silver lines running at a tangent, is invisible to me even after the accident with the gun; only where a *thing* has usurped a human form can my eyes penetrate the curtain, veil, or barrier between our worlds, our dimensions.

Pretty steep, eh? I agree.

Put it that the force-field into which I could see, because of the thing's occupying a body in this world, extends only about three feet at most around said body. Thus I can see the monstrosity itself, and a little of its dimension (the silver lines), and then the veil thickens once more.

I wondered as I sat there in Charing Cross. I wondered what *they* are, and where they came from originally, and what their purpose is. Are they from another planet? I doubt. it. It seems to me the most probable notion that they've always existed coincidental with us in this silver-lined plane of theirs.

When did they begin to break through? Did they only recently, as time goes, learn how to possess bodies? Did some accident a few generations ago gain them the key to our world? Or have they always been with us?

I wondered if they were malignant; or perhaps they were utterly harmless, and merely another life-form content to live among us as human beings? Are they perhaps only playing some intricate, hideous, cosmic joke?

All my instinct rose against such a theory. *They* are more malevolent than an insane cobra. *They* hate us. I could see the pulsing lights of hatred come and go in the Jenn-thing, in the Kinkaid-ogre, in the nurse-creature on board ship. Some long-dormant sense came back to me from the prehistoric days when we were struggling against the sabre-toothed cats, and I smelt hatred wafting from their grisly bodies like an effluvium, a noxious exhalation of evil.

I shook myself all over. Get a grip on yourself, Wolfe! I said. There is very little time (I felt that strongly) and there is a great deal to do.

What should be first?

I must organize against these monsters. So far as I knew I was the only living soul who could see *them*. I would have to guard my life as a thing more precious than riches and kingdoms and the hope of eternal salvation. I must get in touch with other chaps, good decent fellows like yourself, Alec, and old Tommie Killigrew and Algy What's-his-name who was a Leftenant with us at Dunkirk. I accepted sadly the fact that undoubtedly some of them would be *them*. But some were bound to be human. With a nucleus of soldiers and brave, intelligent men I might be able to do something.

If there were only some mark these cacodemons carried! I thought hastily of all the ones I knew thus far, and tried to recall their human



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physical peculiarities and draw some parallel between them. Perhaps a way of looking, or of thinking . . . I stuck on the memory of Jenn. Where else could you find so normal a woman, except for her superhuman beauty? And then Kinkaid was far from beautiful, so that canceled itself out.

Idly, for my mind would not bear too much hard thinking just then, I began to count the beast-folk who passed me on my bench. Then I took out a bit of paper, drew a line down its center, and began to make check marks on it: one here for a beast, one on the other side for a person, noting each as they passed me there on my bench.

I counted some two hundred before I stopped and averaged it up.

The ratio was about seven to six in favor of us. We were in the majority! It was my first hopeful discovery.

Then I recollected that I hadn't seen any children. I concentrated my gaze on the milling mob of me and things, and in a moment I had the answer, or a part of it at least. The things that masqueraded as children were themselves the same size as their companions who occupied fully-grown bodies. By squinting I could see the toddling babies, the ten-year-olds romping at their mothers' sides, the adolescents. All of them were in actuality grown beast-things.

Horror-stricken, I took a pull at my flask regardless of who should see me. No children! *No children!*

So that was how they were taking us over. They got the children's bodies . . .

And then I saw a small boy walking toward an exit with a man and a woman.

A small boy. A real, honest-to-goodness little boy.

So they hadn't got all our progeny yet!

A man came along talking animatedly, though inaudibly to me in the midst of the roar of the station, to his wife, who was a sort of misshapen grey toad. A thing trailed along at the man's side, and the boy-form I could dimly see within it held tight to its "father's" hand.

That happened twice: a man, a thing-wife, and a child-thing.

Then I saw another child, a girl, pigtailed and frocked, with a man and a woman.

I began to ferret out the answer.

A man marries a creature, one of the otherworlders. They spawn a creature.

Or a woman is yoked, unknowing, with one of the beastly chimera-beings in male form. They have beasts also.

Apparently like begets like, and the beasts cannot be born into our dimension unless one of the parents is a usurper, one of *them*.

How they started to infiltrate I can't guess; but it seems plain to me that now they come "in" by route of birth. Perhaps a curse freak accident generations ago let in one of them, and he put his foot in the door . . .

So now the things must somehow open the way to others of their kind by having children, who are born not as real children but as shells or husks occupied by the gorgons; unless my observations, scanty as they were, led me to a wrong conclusion. I did see a man and a



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woman with a beast crawling along after them, but it occurred to me that adoption or even minding-the-neighbors'-kid would explain that.

So that's how they are gathering. My mind flew then to Marion and how the Jenn-thing had seduced me from my love subtly. Of course! They want all the beasts they can smuggle in!

Well, no matter. I must take thought for myself and the morrow, or rather the extremely present present. I had begun to forget that I was in deadly danger.

Where should I go? Out of London, into the countryside until the hue and cry died down. Then a return, disguised, perhaps wearing a beard, and the work of enlisting my forces would begin.

I went up to a ticket window. There was a beast-thing behind the grille. I murmured something about forgetting my wallet and walked away. I felt horribly conspicuous until I remembered that every day hundreds of people act very oddly indeed and *they* must have grown used to it by now.

My danger would begin when word was passed to *them* by Jenn and Kinkaid. Perhaps they had some superhuman agency of contact? Perhaps word had gone out already?

I spotted a man at a ticket window and went up to it. I bought a ticket for a distant station in Cornwall. In a few minutes I was alone in a first-class compartment on the train, gathering speed and drawing away from the scene of my primary danger.

*On horror's head horrors accumulate!* —*Othello*

About forty miles from London my compartment door slid open and what to anyone else would have been a man in a railway guard's uniform entered.

"We have just received a wire," said the hole in the middle of its writhing cluster of jaws, while the green eyes in its chest region stared at me speculatively. "It comes from a Mister Kinkaid . . ."

Kinkaid must have contacted every train out of London! Hysteria, a mad kind of silly panic, took me by the throat; I giggled in its face. "Yes?" I said.

"It seems there has been an accident," went on the creature, sliding the compartment door to behind it. "Your eyes—"

I was just sane enough in that terrible moment to remember to squint. Otherwise, in firing at the monster, I might have missed the man-form altogether, and thrown away my chance. I slung a shot into the middle of the railway guard's belly, jumped for the opposite side of the compartment as it lunged at me, and put another slug into the human head at a range of approximately fourteen inches.

It was the most uncanny thing in the world, watching the beast die out of our world. My bullets hadn't hurt *it* in the slightest, of course. But its human focal point was dying, and it was being forced back into its own silvery-lined dimension. The man slumped to the floor, twisted and gurgled something. The beast-thing stood upright so that the solid human shape made a kind of dark puddle at its base. I saw the edges and the ends of the tentacles start to



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dissolve slowly, then the entire monster swam and shimmered in my vision. As it clung tenaciously to existence in my world, its color strengthened for a minute; then the life force oozed out and the great creature faded like the Cheshire Cat until only its green eyes, hateful and wicked beyond measure, were left. Then they too were gone.

I had destroyed the point of contact. That was all. Naturally I didn't feel in the slightest like a murderer. I had stopped the processes of a kind of puppet, without life of its own; and had driven back into its own demonic dimension a monster from never-never land.

Waking to my surroundings suddenly, I realized that we had been thundering through a tunnel for some minutes; and probably my shots had not been heard by anyone in the increased roaring of the engine. I opened the window of my compartment. I picked up the empty hull of the railway guard and eased it onto the sill, collected my strength and shoved it over into echoing blackness and oblivion.

One down, how many millions to go?

Vainly I wished for a cloak of invisibility, which would allow me to go about the world slaughtering these invaders—but even if I had forty years of life left, what percentage of them could I evict, as it were, before my own death? I might set their progress back a decade or two, but I alone could never hope to eliminate them entirely. I would need a small army for that.

Yes, said I ironically to myself, and every man equipped with an invisible cloak. Why not wish for an invincible sword while you're at it?

I curled up on the seat as comfortably as I could. I had seen a number of railway guards and they'd all been human. I felt fairly safe over that telegram. It had probably been a secret one, to the defunct monster only. One telegram to each train, likely each to a known beast-thing.

A thought brought me to my feet involuntarily. What if the creature I'd banished from our world could communicate with others of his kind who still had their points of contact, their bodies? It was a horrible thought. In that case I had released a fiend for active duty against *me*. The chances were, I thought optimistically, that he couldn't see into my dimension now any more than I could see into his without a focal point of weakening in the veil; but he could likely—almost surely—talk with others of his kind who were half in one world and half in the other.

I must get off the train immediately. Once out of this compartment and the things would be at a loss to find me. My description might even now be circulating through the silver-lined plane, but I look like a hundred thousand other Englishmen. Any identification by strangers would be a tentative, uncertain thing (except for the scars about my eyes, which were invisible at more than two feet), and the beasts couldn't very well start on a reign of terror merely to eliminate one man. That would tip their hand.

We were racing through a countryside of rolling hills, braes, little brooks and peace; in the distance I could see a wood.



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My window was still open. I put on my overcoat and pulled my felt hat low and tight over my forehead. I checked my precious little stock of possessions, and dropped my gun into an outside pocket.

The door slid open once again. I might have been growing used to the beings by now or I might not have been. At any rate, here was the damndest of them all. It rose to the roof, a seven-foot presence as slim and supple as a willow tree, and over its entire surface were thorns, spines, buds, warts, embryonic tentacles, nodules, tumors, wens, blisters, boils, bits of fungi, knobs, snags, peaks, and in short, every sort of protuberance one could imagine; there were no long tentacles, no eyes, nothing but the prickly, bumpy surface. It was a new piece of goods to me entirely.

And yet, it didn't scare me one-tenth so much as the usual chimeras did. It was simply so far removed from any human analogy I could make that it was unbelievable.

I peered closely into its heart and saw a woman, dressed in a neat grey suit. She spoke, her voice a soft husky murmur.

"Mind if I come in?"

"One moment," I said evenly, surprising myself enormously by my coolness. "I presume you've heard from our late lamented comrade, the railway guard?"

The woman gave me a look of pretty surprise, but the bogieman gave the show away by turning green and quaking with wrath. So it had been told! My sudden premonition had proved correct.

My .45 came out of my pocket at the same instant her pearl-handled popgun appeared from her purse. Closing my eyes till they were slits, I put a slug squarely between her pretty eyes.

The prickly willow shaft flashed crimson and went out like a stepped-on cigarette. A pearl-handled revolver clattered on the floor.

I threw a leg over the window sill, grabbed the frame, followed the first leg with the second, held my breath and leaped as far out as I could from the standing start. I hit the embankment and rolled like a shot hare, over and over, my face pillowed in my arms and my whirling body as relaxed as nerve and determination could make it.

I brought up at the foot of the high bank, and lay still a second or two to feel if I were injured. By the favor of heaven I was not; my fall had scuffed my shoes and put a rent in my coat, little more. I jumped to my feet and dashed away for the horizon.

Apparently my leap for life had gone unnoticed, for the train was rapidly vanishing into the distance. I continued to put the tracks behind me until I had covered perhaps two miles; then I slowed up and straightened myself out into the semblance of an ordinary countryman out for a stroll through the hills. Occasionally in the hours that followed I would lie up on a hill and scan the fields with my pocket telescope for signs of pursuit. There were none.

By evening I had found a little inn, one of the ancient British order of taverns which lie on the outskirts of forests and seem to have been there since before Caesar's legions



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were tramping the moors and heaths. Everything about it was old and solid and wonderfully human.

I went in the door, ducking my head to miss the low lintel, and looked about me with the feeling that if there were beast-things in this homely place I would go out into the wood and shoot myself through the head.

Behind the desk sat a wizened old lady, prim and antique in her high-necked purple dress. A very old man was dusting the furniture in a pottery fashion, and two chaps who could have been nothing but retired Colonels reclined in deep chairs with tall glasses at their elbows and read *Punch*.

I had discovered a sanctuary and haven of blessed prosaic normality. In ten minutes I was seated in one of the deep armchairs, a hot rum inside me and a copy of the Times, four days old, spread out on my lap. The promise of a thundering good roast beef dinner came wafting out of the kitchen to my twitching nostrils. I was home.

*One sees more devils than vast hell can hold.*

*—A Midsummer-Night's Dream*

I stayed at that inn nearly four days before *they* discovered me.

It was a scandalous luxury, to appropriate all that time to myself when I may have been the destined savior of mankind from the beast-folk; but I could not have left that wonderful place sooner to save my immortal soul. By the fourth day it was as though my dealings with *them* had been the most horrendous sort of nightmare, very real while it was happening, but growing more nebulous hour by hour in the glow of the hearth-fire and the peaceful mild boredom of the old men's conversation.

One of them—he turned out to be a retired Colonel, just as I had surmised—was named Bedford. He was one of your real Blimps, stuffy and repetitious, but obviously a man who could be brave to the point of idiocy. We had served in the same Indian towns and stations, though thirty years apart, and in four days we were blood brothers and rapidly becoming inseparable.

I came downstairs on the fourth day champing the bit at thought of bacon and eggs for breakfast, and there at the desk talking to the wisp of a proprietress was a beast-thing. My eyes flew open in amazed incredulity, so far had my thoughts been from *them*, and the heavy country accent came incredibly to my ears from the pulsing monstrosity.

"'E's 'ereabouts, mum, that's certain . . ."

I backtracked silently to my room and was bolting myself in when a far better thought struck me. Pausing only to collect my gear, I flew to Colonel Bedford's room and let myself in without knocking.

"Listen, Colonel," I said without preamble, though his eyebrows shot up to the roots of his hair at such presumption on the part of a mere ex-Captain, no matter how good a friend, "I'm in a hell of a jam."

He sat down and motioned me to go on.

"I can't begin to tell you about it, because you'd think I was dotty (he



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made negative motions with his hand), but I'll tell you this: I've done absolutely nothing wrong (he nodded, naturally an officer does nothing wrong, his face said), but they're after me, and it's vital—I can't tell you how vital—that they don't catch me. It's more important than anything else in the world right now, not only to me, but to England herself." I was going to say mankind, but didn't, for that would have sounded plain silly.

"What can I do?" he asked at once. Bless him!

"There's a man downstairs looking for me now. I think he may be a constable. But he's wrong, all wrong, and I'm right. And I've got to get away."

"Take my car," he said coolly.

"Thanks," I said. "Here's two hundred quid—pay the bill here for me and keep what's left for the car in case I lose it. And now listen closely. If you haven't heard from me in, say, ten days go up to London. I ask you this favor as one Indian officer to another. Go to the Gloucester Club and ask for me; if I'm not there, get hold of Alec Talbot, or Geoffrey Exeter, or chaps called Warwick and Salisbury. I don't know, I haven't seen them in years, they may all be dead. In that case I'm afraid there's nothing for it but to give up and forget the whole affair. But if I can do it I'm going to get back there and find one or two of them and, with luck, tell them my yarn. They'll tell it to you, if they're—well, if they're alive, and the right sort of chaps."

"Names again?" he barked, whipping out a pencil and a scrap of paper.

"Talbot, Exeter, Warwick, Salisbury. Or you might try Will Chester. I'll do my best to get to one of them before I'm snagged. It's wild tale, Colonel, but I assure you on my honor as a gentleman that it's true." I hoped I was taking the right line with him. I was.

"Car's in front now," said Bedford, not turning a hair at such lawlessness. "I'll go down and engage this chappie while you get down the ivy." He gestured toward the window, shook my hand briefly, and popped out like a ten-year-old going to a party.

The ivy, a thick, tangled, ages-old mass of black strong stuff, was evidently intended by Nature for a ladder. I hand-over-handed it down. dropped the final eight feet, took six bounds to reach the front of the inn, saw that the coast was clear and shot into the Colonel's little two-seater as fast as I could go. The starter balked for a moment, my hair rose on end as I jammed and jiggled and fumed, and then I was off with a roaring whoosh.

I had gone a couple of miles along the rutted road through the wood before the other car appeared in my mirror. I cursed savagely at myself for forgetting to put it out of commission. It overhauled me rapidly—Bedford's little motor made heavy going of this rotten road—and soon my enemy was drawing level with me.

A green dragon leaned out of the window and shouted at me.

"Ere, now, sir, pull over there, I want a talk with you!" it bellowed. I squinted and it was, indeed, a constable. I drove with my left hand



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and took out my revolver with my right. I fired at him and swore at the bounding little auto that spoiled my aim. I fired again and my second shot drew blood. The green dragon turned violet with fury.

"There, you dirty dragon!" I screeched tauntingly. I knew I would kill this beast, at least relegate it to its own world once more, and I couldn't resist letting it know I was really the freak its foul crew were all searching for. "How do you like that lead, you grisly nightmare?"

I leveled my gun and slanted my eyes narrowly. I put a shot into the chest of the human puppet and saw with vast satisfaction that the monster was growing filmy. Its automobile swerved and crashed headlong into a tree. I settled myself quite happily for a long drive.

In a couple of hours I struck the outskirts of London. I put up the Colonel's two-seater at a garage, gave his name and address as though they'd been my own, and said that I'd probably be back in two or three days, but that if I wasn't they were to drop me a line. Then I caught a tram for Piccadily Circus.

I propped myself up against the corner of a building, trying to look like a reformed con man who had come upon evil days; I hadn't yet shaved that morning and I thought my performance was pretty fair. I stuck a cigarette in the corner of my mouth, held it limply between my lips, didn't light it, turned up my collar and pulled my now-battered felt hat rakishly across one eye. I doubted whether even the Kinkaid-fiend would recognize me. But I kept one hand on my .45 . . .

Alec, old friend, if you could see what I saw that morning! The bustling throngs of people, all so pitifully unknowing, so innocently unaware of the concourse of ghouls, basilisks, triple-headed monsters, demogorgons, and hobgoblins of every description that brush by them every second of their lives! It was horrible, it wrenched one's soul into a tight knot. What could I do? What could I, the only mortal on earth who knew our danger, do toward warning humanity of its deadly danger? Nothing. No matter to whom I told my story, no matter how many believed me, what could they do with no method of telling the men from the beast-folk! Through no fault of my own, I was the most hopeless, the most incompetent savior of mankind imaginable.

The worst of it all came when I concentrated on seeing the humanoid puppets within the beasts. So many of them were young, handsome, eager chaps . . . so many were pretty girls . . .

Almost all the Piccadilly Commandoes, as we used to call them, are of the beast-people. So very many are alien beings from the silvery dimension which lies next to ours . . .

I stood there, thinking futilely, for about an hour. Then I went into a restaurant and had myself a jolly good meal. If I was going to die in the next few hours, I'd do it on a full stomach.

I then started walking toward the Club.

And ran into the Jenn-demon before I'd gone a hundred yards.

I whipped into a doorway, but it



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saw me. It cried something, and I raced like a miler back toward the Circus. People—and they—halted to stare after me; this would never do. I slowed up, walking briskly but sanely. Then I heard the clamor grow, and dived through a swinging door into a pub. I sought the men's room, locked myself in, and hauled my body up to the window set high in the dirty grey wall. For a second I teetered there, while my fingers worked madly at the bolt, then it was open and I was dragging the window up. An alley, deserted and lonely, met my thankful gaze. Leaving the window open behind me, for the locked door would ultimately give me away, I ran down the alley to its furthest end, where it debouched into a narrow street. Here things were quiet, and I walked swiftly up toward town.

For hour after hour I walked, uncertain at times where I was, slipping into doorways and up side streets every few minutes with all the panic of the fugitive tearing at my soul. Unreasoning terror at times would run a few steps until sanity forced me into a walk again. It was a mad day, a very mad day in a very mad world.

Sometime about dusk I saw the headlines.

"Insane Killer Seen In London!"

"Jeremy Wolfe in Piccadily Circus?"

"Cold-blooded Murderer of Three Still at Large!"

And much more of the same. The beast-folk had done their work surpassingly well.

I took a room in a house in a dingy district, shaved, slept for a few hours; and in the cold fog of dawn crept out into the streets, a man with a price on my head, a modern Robin Hood who had killed the villains to save the good people and found himself a doomed and hunted man for it.

About ten o'clock they cornered me. I was sitting on a bench in a park near the Club, getting up my nerve to come and find a friend to help me, when I was spotted. *They* came after me hotfoot, a dozen of them, to most eyes a handful of bobbies and plain citizens; I dropped one of them to give the others pause, and fled for my life.

Dashing across a street some little distance in advance of my pursuers, I managed to jump on the rear step of a two-decked bus as it passed between them and me. Fortunately there was plenty of traffic. I went up to the top and sat down, breathing heavily. I rode ten blocks and got off, went into a cinema and fidgeted through two hours or so of film that I didn't see, while outside the hue and cry came and passed up the streets. Then, fearful and cringing. I left the shelter of the theatre and made my way cautiously and by devious routes to the Club. I asked for you, seeing no one whom I had known in the old days and praying that you'd be around. Praise heaven, you were.

And here I am. Apparently no one's noticed me thus far, and from your warm reception, Alec. I know you've not seen the papers. But sooner or later someone who's heard of the business will spot me, and I'll be on my merry way once more. At any rate, I've got my yarn out at last. Now, if I've got to be scragged, well,



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there'll be someone who'll know I'm not a cold-blooded murderer or an insane fiend . . .

*I pass'd, methought, the melancholy flood,*
*With that grim ferryman which poets write of,*
*Unto the kingdom of perpetual night.*

*King Richard III*

We were silent then, Jerry and I, for the length of time it might have taken to count thirty. I stared at the dud bomb's track in the east wall.

"You're right, old man," I said then, "I haven't seen a paper in days."

"They're full of horrid bad stuff," he said. He had nearly finished the bottle of Scotch, but it hadn't touched him. His voice was as even, as sane and cool, as it had been years ago in the hell of Dunkirk when he'd knelt beside me and helped to lift my brother's body from the mud. His scarred eyes were sunken and reddened at the rims, but they were neither wild nor vicious, as a true killer's would have been.

"We've got to hide you, laddie," I told him, shaking just a trifle with suppressed excitement. "They'll check the Club, that's certain. What about my digs?"

"If there's time. You know, old chap," he said, a faint grim grin touching his haggard features, "I rather feel the sands runnin' out. I doubt that we make your place."

"Rot."

"No, no, it was miraculous that I came past the doors without being spotted. And I'm tired, suddenly, more tired than I've ever been. I think I'm done."

"Good Lord, man, who's to save us if you're taken?"

He gave me an indescribable look of mingled friendship and quizzical inquiry. "You believe my yarn?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation. "I believe it. From any other man, I don't know . . . but I believe it."

His answer was a handclasp that gripped like a bulldog's jaws.

"Oh, maybe it's partly because I'm bored to death, and feel myself rusting away, here on the shelf," I went on. "And maybe it's because I'd welcome a good stiff fight to go out in, me havin' this missing flipper and not knowing anything but how to drill men and make war; but I think it's mostly because no man in the world could dream up a yarn like that and tell it so straight if it weren't at least partially true!"

"Good old scout," said Jerry fervently.

"Finish that glass," I told him, "and then we'll smuggle you out of here and up to my place. After that we can check on some of the other chaps who might—"

"Oh, God," said Jerry suddenly, in a low groaning voice. "Look there."

In the archway between the "mausoleum" and the library stood seven or eight men in plain clothes who couldn't have been more obviously detectives if they'd had "Scotland Yard" tattooed on their foreheads. With them were three P.C.s, looking around the library curiously and cautiously.

Jerry Wolfe ducked down behind me so that his face was hidden.



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"For gosh sakes, boy, don't be so dam' conspicuous," I hissed.

"*They*," he muttered. "It's *they*. Listen to me, Alec."

"But, Jerry," I began.

"No, listen. I'm done, their system's too good. But I'm leaving you to carry on. Figure out your own method, but somehow, Alec old son, *fight them!* Get yourself some allies, and smash back at the beasts!"

"How?" I hissed frantically. "How, Jerry?"

"Your problem now, Alec. Listen. There's Will Chester in the corner, snoozin' away. He's all right. And a minute ago Geoff Exeter passed us, and he's human. You can trust them. And Colonel Bedford, when he gets in touch with you."

"But—" I said. They were coming slowly toward us in their methodical search.

He sat up and turned his head slightly away so that his face would be invisible to them. "No, no time. Not now, nor ever again. Chester, Exeter, Bedford. I leave you the three. Tell them. Make them believe you. And one of you take the chance. As I did."

"You mean, powder?"

"Yes, duplicate my experience. It's a million million to one against it, but laddie, I think you'll do it. If one fails, another must try. I tell you, it's our only chance! The race's only chance of survival. And when you can see them, be careful. Be cautious as I was not cautious. Be guileless and face up to them with a grin. And begin the fight for me, as I cannot. Get the same doctor I had, Barringer, John Baringer. He's all right. That'll be five of you. And I'd forgotten Marion Black! Make her believe now, Alec. She must. She'll make six."

"We can still get out—"

"We can't. I'm a dead man." He took his hand out of his pocket and there was a heavy revolver in it. "I'll make my stand here."

Without relevance I said inanely, "I've got a tremendously long lifeline, you know. Reaches all around my hand. I put a lot of faith in that."

"Alec, Alec, listen. I'll be dead in three minutes and the second sight is on me. Remember my Irish great-grandmother! I see you winning. I see a long, horrible, uphill struggle such as the world has never known. But I see you leading us back to the light." His voice, low almost to a whisper, was as eerie in those words as an old crone's mumbling over a gypsy fire. "I see a time when the ratio is not seven to six, but seven to three, or two, or one . . . Get into politics, one of you: that will count for us. Strike in the dark. Hire murderers. Corrupt judges. Kill them, kill them, kill them! Send them back to their own silver land where they belong. Control births. Establish—"

"Trust me," I said. The policemen had turned and were coming toward us from the other end of the library. Jerry held his gun against his chest and continued:

"I believe that there are others who can see. *Their* fright over me is too frantic; I'm not the first. Find the others!"

"If I live, I'll do it."

"You'll live, old man. You'll do it."



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"Pardon me, gentlemen," said a man in a brown suit, stopping beside us. "But 'ave you seen—"

Jerry drove him back gasping with a slam in the midriff. He leapt across the room, not to the door, but to the east wall. Standing against the dud's scar, firm and tall as a Sergeant-Major on parade, he began to drop them as they rushed him. He got three before their first answering shot barked out. Then bullets hit him everywhere; in the legs, the chest. He weaved and fell, firing his final shot from his knees.

I shoved through the detectives and policemen. I knelt beside him, looking into his eyes.

"Crazy, sir," gasped a constable, dripping blood. "Clean mad-dorg crazy, this 'un were."

"He was talking to you," said a plain-clothes fellow, looking at me very queerly indeed. "What did he say, sir?"

"Some wild rambling yarn," I said, biting my lip. "He was obviously mad, as your man says."

"He's killed at least four people sir," the fellow went on, "besides our boys here. We'll want your evidence later on. Will you—"

"I'll swear that he was crazy as a March hare," I said slowly. "No two of his words made sense."

"Thank you, sir," said the man, satisfied.

Kneeling there, I looked into Wolfe's eyes. They held surprise and shock and unutterable pain. Slowly I slid my hand up my chest to my throat where no one but Jerry could see it.

With a faint, a very faint wink, I thrust up two fingers in the old V-for-Victory signal of the war. He grinned through the pain, his blue eyes cleared, and he let out his breath and died.

I stood up straighter than I'd stood since I lost my arm. I turned and pushed through the mob, walking slowly and surely and a little proudly toward the door. I had an overwhelming sense of a tremendous responsibility that was now mine, all mine. I had a job to do, a very big job indeed.

There are only four men and a girl to help me. Six human beings to fight against the usurpers . . . And yet, now there will be seven. Yes, you too know the story—the truth. There is a world to fight and to conquer. But I think we will do it.

I think we will do it . . .

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Continued from page 77

digging into the flesh. "That mangled remains of your friend Captain Sam Walters—you saw that through my eyes as I wore my portable dream cap. I think that while I have it on, if I were to 'lead' you into that room again, you would be able to see those features as they really are, and accept them, instead of your censor blocking out the truth and substituting those of a friend, symbolically."

"It was me?" Arnold asked.

Dr. Bridewell nodded.

The End



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# THE PROPHECY
## by BILL PRONZINI

*Bill Pronzini, still in his early 20's, has sold over 25 stories to the crime magazines, men's markets and so on. His first published fantasy combines an old theme and a predictable ending into a wholly chilling and original point of view.*

Arizikian, the High Priest of Seers, predicted that the world would come to an end on the 29th day of August, 1979, at the hour of noon.

His announcement was made public exactly one week prior to that date. Upon hearing it, the Believers fell to their knees, crying out in anguish, praying with upraised hands that their sins be forgiven and their eternal souls be allowed safe passage through the Gates of Heaven. But they numbered relatively few.

The Skeptics—a slightly larger preponderence—were, of course, contemptuous.

"A hoax," some said, "created for publicity purposes."

"Pure foolishness," others laughed. "Seers have been predicting the end of the world for centuries. Have any of them been right yet?"

But in the masses—the Agnostics, if you will—there arose the seed of apprehension. Arizikian was no ordinary Seer; the very mention of his name touched nerves, brought chills.

The unspoken question echoes silently from their lips: "Suppose, this time, it's true?"

For was it no Arizikian who had predicted the exact day man would first set foot on the planet Mars, and did not man set foot there on that day?

Was it not Arizikian who foresaw the terrible nuclear explosion at Cape Kennedy and with it the total obliteration of the sovereign state of Florida, and did it not come to pass?

Was it not Arizikian who prophesied the exact time and place the thirty-ninth President of the United States would die of massive coronary thrombosis, and did not the President die at that time, in that place, in that way?

Was it not Arizikian whose every portension, without fail, without err, came true exactly as he said it would?

But—

But—the end of the world?

But—Arizikian was never wrong.

The days passed, and with their passing the apprehension grew.

The 29th day of August arrived.

The Believers gathered on rich, verdant meadows in every country in the world. They sat, legs crossed, on the clean, sweet grasses, their arms lifted, their mouths opened in prayer, their faces upturned to brilliant sunshine, or cool ocean breezes, or driving summer rain.

The Skeptics noted the day with scorn, and nothing more.

The Agnostics attempted to conceal their anxiety beneath the guise



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of normalcy. Men stood on street corners, or sat in cool, air-conditioned offices, their eyes covertly darting to strap watches or wall clocks and the second hand that circled with infinite slowness there.

Women sat in front of flickering television screens, their housework undone, unable on this day to lose themselves in the false reality of the soap dramas, waiting with moist lips and wide eyes for the news broadcasts that followed.

Time passed. Seconds ticked off; inexorable. The sun—palpitating, or pale, or non-existent—climbed higher into the sky, coming perpendicular.

At eleven fifty-nine, the silent countdown began.

*Fifty-nine.*

*Fifty-eight.*

*Fifty-seven* . . .

In those parts of the world where superstition was inbred into the culture, work came to a standstill; people milled about in confusion, frightened, beseaching.

*Forty-five.*

*Forty-four*

*Forty-three* . . .

The Believers were standing in the meadows now. They had begun to chant.

*Thirty.*

*Twenty-nine.*

*Twenty-eight* . . .

A billion eyes lifted to the sky.

*Sixteen.*

*Fifteen.*

*Fourteen* . . .

The people of the world held their breath.

*Four*

*Three.*

*Two.*

*One.*

Noon.

Came.

*And went.*

Nothing happened.

Nothing at all!

Life went on, and the Earth continued to rotate on its axis.

Men turned to each other in the buildings and on the streets and in the fields, smiling a bit sheepishly, feeling a bit foolish for the weakness that watered their knees.

"You see?" they said with thinly-veiled relief. "The same as it's always been with these things. No need for alarm."

In the green meadows, Believers sank to the grass in bewilderment.

"How can it be?" they asked of their neighbors. "How can it be?"

The Skeptics smiled knowingly and went about their business with the superior air of the pragmatist.

"The end of the world, indeed!" they scoffed. "How absurd!"

On television sets everywhere, newscasters smirked.

"Contrary to what Arizikian, the High Priest of Seers, predicted one week ago," they said, "the world did *not* come to an end at noon today. Arizikian, it seems, is human after all; he was finally wrong."

Those words had been joyously repeated a thousand times, in a multitude of tongues and dialects, when the sky split open like an overripe melon at a quarter to three, and the heavens rained the holocaust down from above.

Yes, Arizikian had finally been wrong.

By two hours and forty-five minutes.

The End



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# THE COLLECTORS

By GORDON DEWEY

*There have been a number of stories on this subvariation of the "we are property" theme but Dewey's, at least conceptually, is one of the most compact and deadly of the lot. It's no classic, to be sure, it isn't even a minor classic, alas, but it's interesting to think what kind of story this might have been if the author had come to grips with the implications of his material. So few of us do or even try . . . it doesn't, after all, pay.*



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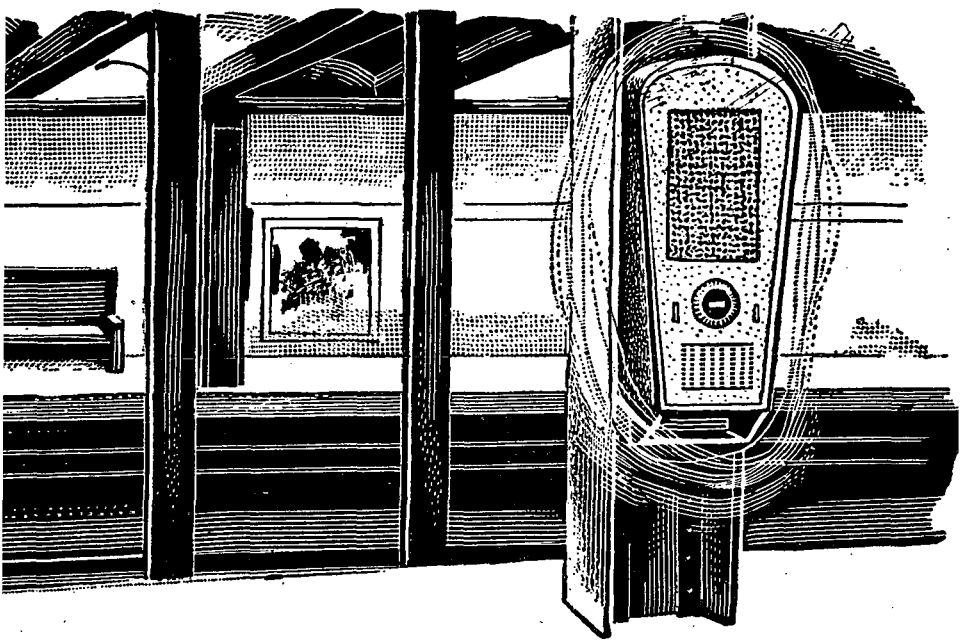

Illustrator: Harry Rosenbaum

FRED LOWRY stood before the mirror on the wall of his apartment living room. Gaze attentively fixed on his reflection, he repeated the words, even-spacing them in a firm, determined tone: "I am a methodical man."

He watched his lips move in the mirrored image; heard his voice clearly, distinctly. Perhaps it was a bit louder than normal, perhaps slightly more emphatic; but there was no lack of his customary preciseness of enunciation.

He seated himself again at his little desk, then, convinced that there was nothing wrong with him. He knew what he was doing. He underscored that mentally.

Nevertheless, there were the figures. His own daily records did not lie. Somewhere, somehow, during the day, fifty cents had disappeared from his pocket.

And this was not the first time.

He spread out his records for the past ten days, adjusted his desk lamp to shed an even illumination over them. It had happened every day. Except last Sunday — he'd stayed in that day. Each night, when he recorded his expenditures for the day and



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balanced them against his cash-in-pocket at the starting of the day, there was a discrepancy. It had never happened before.

Fred Lowry never lost anything, never misplaced anything, never spent a cent that he could not account for. His earnings, to the last penny, were recorded in his personal account books. His spendings, to the last penny, even to computation of sales tax, were efficiently distributed in his books of account. His monthly trial balances always worked out accurately.

He looked around the apartment. The shelves of books were in orderly precision — he knew where each book belonged on the shelves, and each book was in its place. Every piece of furniture in the room was placed for the most efficient utilization of the available space. In one corner stood a file cabinet. In its drawers reposed his correspondence and other records, each item exactly where it should be.

Fred Lowry was a methodical man.

But now he was both puzzled and annoyed. He turned back to his daily records, examined them searchingly once again.

This time he noted something which he'd missed at first. There seemed to be a correlation between the missing sum, each day, and the amount of money he'd started out with. He made some rapid calculations, and was even more incredulous.

Roughly, his shortage approximated ten per cent, day after day. If he started out with ten dollars, a dollar, or a little more or a little less, could not be accounted for at night. If he started out with five dollars, from forty to sixty cents would be missing.

It looked as though he were being — tithed!

Lowry leaned back in his chair, uttered a short, nervous laugh which was not a laugh. The sound of it punctuated his unease.

If he were a religious man, he supposed that he would tithe, faithfully giving ten per cent of his earnings to the Church. But he wasn't; and he resented *being* tithed. If that was it. He shook himself in annoyance. This was silly — but there it was, in black and white, in his own handwriting: each day ten per cent of the money in his pockets had vanished.

To add to his irritation, there was no ledger account in his books to absorb either miscellaneous losses or gains. He had never needed one. He was a methodical man.

He pursed his lips meditatively, gazing off into space. Then, coming to a sudden resolution, he began to move swiftly, purposively.

Gathering up the records, he



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placed them in precise order by date, clipped them together, and attached a bit of note paper to the bundle on which he wrote, with pen and ink, in his neat bookkeeper's hand: "Pending — out of balance." Then he pulled open the top drawer of the desk, placed the bundle in the lower right corner, taking care not to disturb the arrangement in the drawer, and carefully closed it so that the edges of the drawer did not protrude beyond the frame of the desk.

Then he locked the drawer and tested it to be sure that it was indeed locked.

Pushing back his chair, Fred Lowry got to his feet. In his mind was the determined resolve to go into this tomorrow, and somehow find out where and how and why he was being relieved — he thought of it that way — of a little money each day. He knew he was not losing it, nor spending it unaccountably. There was only the one alternative: it was being taken from him. It had to be that way. That, too, was impossible — but there it was.

But wait! Why not do it tonight? If it happened in the daytime — if it happened at all — might it not happen just as readily one time as another? *No time like the present*, he reminded himself wryly. That motto, along with others like "Do it now," "It is later than you think," "Don't say it, write it," "A place for everything and everything in its place," was posted at a strategic spot in the office where he worked.

He emptied his pockets on the desk. Everything. Money, keys, cigarettes, wallet, notebook, pen and pencil, lighter — the works. Then he examined each pocket with meticulous thoroughness. There were no holes.

He replaced everything in his pockets, except the money — loose change and wallet — and his notebook and pencil. There were a five and two ones in the wallet. Opening the notebook to unused facing pages, he recorded that fact on the left page, checked the wallet again, to be sure, and replaced it in his hip pocket. He buttoned the pocket flap securely, and checked that.

From a small cash box which he took out of another drawer of his desk, he added coins to those from his pocket, to make, with the banknotes in his wallet, a total of ten dollars. He recounted it to preclude any possibility of error.

In his notebook he recorded the change: three halves, four quarters, three dimes, three nickels, five pennies. Total, ten dollars. He put the money in his pocket. On another slip of paper he made a duplicate of the money record in his notebook, noted the date and the time on it, put the



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duplicate record in the cash box, relocked the box and returned it to the desk drawer.

Then he simply sat there for several minutes turning the matter over in his mind, searching for any possible flaw in his plan, examining it for either improvement or for a possible better course of action.

At last he snapped off the desk light, got up, put on his hat and coat, and checked his wrist watch against the time on his electric desk clock. They agreed.

He left a floor lamp burning, then gave the apartment a quick once-over. Except for the lighted lamp, everything was just as it would normally be, if it were morning and he were leaving for work.

He picked up the notebook and pencil from his desk, walked to the door and opened it. Then, on the page facing the money record in his notebook, he made a terse entry: Left apartment, 10:50 P.M., $10.00.

Closing and locking the door behind him, he left the building and walked briskly to the bus stop. Here he checked his money again, counting it carefully, and made another entry in his notebook: Bus stop, 10:58 P.M., $10.00.

He had to wait longer than usual — the buses did not run as often this late at night as they did during the day. The cool night air felt good on his face, and there was the perfume of night-blooming flowers threading through the light breeze. Overhead the stars struggled against the glowing nimbus of the city at night. There was no moon.

A few sleepy birds, in nearby trees, talked over the day's events — and then the bus, a yellow-eyed glaring monster, tires swishing on the pavement, pulled up to the stop and Fred Lowry boarded it.

He dropped twenty cents into the till box and found a seat. There were only two other passengers — this time of night most persons would be going away from the city, not toward it. Lowry frowned. For the purposes of his test he would have preferred a packed bus with only standing room left.

He made another entry in his notebook: Bus, 11:16 P.M., 20¢. He counted his money. So far so good. He had nine dollars and eighty cents left. He recorded that on the cash record side of the notebook pages.

Step by step, as he made his way to the office building where he worked, he recorded time and expenditures, painstakingly checking his remaining cash at each point. At the subway stop; as he boarded the subway; as he left it. At the cafeteria, where he ordered a breakfast he did not want and barely touched.



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He signed the night register in the lobby of the office building — this too was a deviation from the daytime pattern, but it couldn't be helped, of course. He got on the elevator and said "Eleven" as it started upward.

The night watchman eyed him curiously. "Working late tonight, sir?" he asked.

"Just remembered something I had to check," Lowry replied, using what he hoped was a casual tone. "Getting close to the end of the month, you know."

"That's right. . . . Here's your floor, sir."

Fred Lowry unlocked his office door, entered, switched on the lights, hung up his hat and coat, and went directly to his desk and sat down. Turning on his desk lamp, he checked his record. So far he had spent one dollar and thirty-seven cents. He should have eight dollars and sixty-three cents left. He counted the money. Right. So far, then, everything was as usual.

He thought about himself, tried to sort out his feelings. No apprehension, no tension, no foreboding — not one thing could he feel that was different from, say, what it would be if he were here at his desk, at nine in the morning, on a regular work day.

He spread out some papers, flipped the cover off his calculator, lit a cigarette, and went through the motions of doing some work. Presently he went out, rang for the elevator, told the watchman as they descended to street level that he would be back soon, and at the dairy lunch where he always ate he ordered a sandwich he didn't want. But he paid for it — breaking the five-dollar bill this time — and drank the coffee he ordered with it.

Back in his office, he checked his records and cash again. Still nothing missing. He went through the motions of some more work, then replaced the papers neatly in his desk, put the cover back over the calculator, checked his money once more, put on his hat and coat, locked the office and left the building, signing out on the way out.

At the station where he left the subway on his way home, everything still checked. Still no shortage.

He went up to the bus stop, sat down on the bench and waited. He was disgusted with the whole business by now. Nothing had happened. Conditions were wrong, that's what was the matter. No crowds. Maybe in crowds someone had been picking his pockets. But for pennies? That hardly made good sense. Maybe in busy restaurants he had been short-changed — the five-dollar bill he used in the dairy lunch had been an invitation. But not enough people around — no one would try a hold-out unless



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crowds were pushing him along.

Well, it had been a good try.

Half-heartedly, while waiting for the bus, he checked his pockets once more. A plan was no good unless one followed through on it. But he'd been the sole passenger to alight from the subway; he'd met no one either on the platform, on the steps to the street, or from the subway entrance to the bus stop. No other person was waiting for a bus. So obviously there was no chance for any money to disappear.

He was seventy-five cents short!

Suddenly excited, alert, blood pounding in his ears, he counted his money again, slowly, with scrupulous care. The bus came, paused, and went on — he was scarcely aware of it.

There were six dollars and fifty-eight cents in his pockets: the notebook record showed that there should be seven dollars and thirty-three cents.

Somewhere, seventy-five cents had vanished!

He sat there stiffly upright, tense, searching his memory of the past few hours. Yes, he could recall every time he had handled money, had spent it, how much, and for what. The record was accurate, according to his recollection. Those factors checked out.

His balance had been correct just before he left the subway — there was the last entry: Leave subway, 2:44 A.M., $7.33.

Somewhere, then, between the platform and the bus stop, seventy-five cents somehow had left his possession. Not stolen; no pocket picking — he'd met no one, seen no one. So, he lost it. He looked for the hole in his pocket. No hole. Still . . .

He was on his feet, retracing his steps, peering searchingly at the sidewalk, the pavement, the steps as he followed them back down to the subway platform, the platform itself. Every crack, every corner, every cranny. Maybe a grating? But there wasn't one. Just bare concrete. Nothing else. No place for a coin to hide. No coins.

And now Fred Lowry began to feel something disturbingly akin to fear. This time he had some feelings to sort out. And he didn't like what he sorted. Money just did not vanish like that, in a sane world. No trained investigator could have kept closer tab on his movements, on the handling of his funds, than had Fred Lowry this night.

He heard the *click-clack* of nimble feet coming down the steps, the *tap-tap* of high heels as she came toward him where he stood near the edge of the platform. He turned, looked her over very deliberately.

She swerved somewhat away from him, flushing, and her chin went a little higher.



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Lowry found himself wondering about her. It was late. Had she been working until this hour? Been to a party, maybe? What time did she have to get up in the morning? It reminded him that there wasn't much time left for his own sleeping; he'd better call it a night.

The girl was young, not more than twenty-two, Fred guessed. Well built, slender. Not a beauty, but definitely on the nice-looking side. Nice firm features. You could see that she knew her way around — the right way.

She was peering past him into the murk of the tunnel. He found himself listening with her, but there was no tell-tale humming of the rails to herald the approach of a train.

She walked past him, not seeming to avoid him, but it was there. He felt that he could understand how it was with her — a girl and a strange man alone on a deserted subway platform. Sure, she'd be watchful.

He kept his eyes on her as she reached the end of the platform, hesitated, then turned and started back. She stayed near the tunnel wall, studiously avoiding a meeting of their eyes. Lowry knew that she knew that he was watching her.

He saw the sudden veer she made toward the recess in the wall. There was something in there—he couldn't quite make it out from where he stood.

But he could see her actions clearly enough. She opened her purse, took out a wisp of bright blue cloth, reached in again and brought out some coins.

Then she moved closer to the alcove, and now he could see that it was a vending machine she faced, almost hidden in the dimness of the recess where it had been placed. She dropped several coins into the machine, put the rest back in her purse, stuffed the blue handkerchief in also, and snapped her purse shut. The sound of the snap seemed magnified in the deserted underground.

Fred Lowry felt that quick alertness tingle through him again. The girl was walking away from the machine toward him; and as she came closer he felt certain that the bright vitality of her face was dimmed as though with a thin film of — what?

Quickly deciding, he moved forward to intercept her.

"Excuse me —" he began, not liking the approach, but unable to put his tongue to a better opening.

She paused, looked at him with no sure expression on her face, a touch of not-quite awareness in her eyes.

"Forgive me, but — well, I saw you put coins in the machine. You didn't get anything out. I thought if it were stuck . . ."

Sudden expression, aliveness,



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flooded back into her face, awareness into her eyes. She stared at him a moment, shook her head uncertainly, started to walk past him.

Fred Lowry felt his face getting red, knew his best course was to let it go. He persisted, doggedly. "I mean," he stammered, "you — you —"

She whirled to face him, angry annoyance in her eyes. "Look, mister!" The words were clipped. "Guys like you —" As suddenly as it came, her anger subsided, giving way to an almost-twinkle in her eyes. "Okay, I'll play it out with you. *What* machine?"

Lowry felt the rebuff, felt the rebuke, did not like being laughed at. "Seriously, Miss, I wasn't trying to — well . . . suppose we just skip it." It was his turn to be dignified.

Again the girl shook her head, and a little frown creased her brow. "You *seem* all right," she said, eyes searching his face intently. "But I didn't put any coins in a machine. What machine are you talking about?"

He pointed to the alcove, and her gaze swung to it as he told her: "You walked over to that machine. You opened your purse. You took out a bright blue handkerchief. Then you took out some money, dropped coins in the machine, and walked away from it. You didn't get anything for your money — you didn't wait to see if anything came out."

The frown came back to her face. "I do have a sample of bright blue cloth in my purse — it's *not* a hanky. But I haven't had it open since I left the turnstile."

He stared at her. "One of us is kidding one of us. . . . Okay, if that's the way you want it."

He could have sworn that she was sincere, but — He half-turned away from her.

"Wait!" Her voice was low, almost pleading; her hand light on his arm. "I don't know how you knew about the blue cloth — I could, I suppose, have snapped my purse open and shut without thinking. . . . But I certainly did *not* go anywhere near that gum machine!"

"But I saw you . . . Hey! Hold on! *Gum* machine?" Taking her by the arm, he led her nearer to the alcove, to a point where the machine was clearly visible. "Gum machine? That's a cigarette machine!"

The anger was back in her voice. "All right, Buster," she snapped. "A joke's a joke, but this one isn't even funny. That's a gum machine. . . . Besides, I'll prove it to you. Even if your story is correct, I don't smoke. So what would I be doing putting money in a cigarette machine?"

Suddenly everything clicked!

Lowry had his problem; he had his answer. And a bigger problem



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now began to take its place.

At least, now he knew where his missing money had gone, for whatever that was worth.

He narrowed his eyes, looked at the machine, *saw* it. Unobtrusive.

The blood was singing in his ears again as Lowry, feeling an edgy curiosity, walked toward the machine.

He was facing the girl, walking toward her. There was bewilderment on her face. And the hint of a smile, mostly on the lips. The eyes were grave, wary, definitely disturbed.

"You do make your points," she said. "Is that just the way you claim I did it?"

"Did what?"

"Are you serious? You said you saw me drop some coins into that machine, then walk away from it without getting anything for my money." She laughed, mirthlessly. "Neither of us will get rich this way."

He stared at her.

He had been going toward the machine. Then he was facing the girl — he could not remember getting close to the machine. . . . He eyed it moodily. This thing could be — was — dangerous.

While the girl watched him with faint amusement on her face, Fred Lowry counted his money. Five dollars and ninety-three cents! Another sixty-five cents vanished!

He shook his head. "I — what did I do? What goes on, anyhow?"

"You walked over to the machine. You took some coins from your pocket. You dropped them in the slot. Then you walked away from it — you didn't wait for whatever you bought. . . . Do you chew gum?"

"No! It's a cigarette machine. I don't remember — being near it."

"One of us," the girl said mockingly, "is kidding one of us."

Lowry's voice was almost a whisper. "I saw you put some coins in it. I don't remember putting any in."

The girl looked at him searchingly. "This could be a fine practical joke, for strangers. . . . Let's pretend for right now that we aren't strangers. I'm Sally Chamberlain —"

"I'm Fred Lowry."

"— and I saw you put money in that machine. I don't remember putting any in myself."

"Hmmm. And neither of us took anything out of it — neither of us waited to find out."

They looked at the machine.

"Cigarette machines," Lowry said musingly, "are usually wider than that."

"It's a gum machine!"

"Now look," Lowry said, impatiently. "You keep saying it's a gum machine."

"It is. And I don't smoke."

"And I don't chew gum. Scout's honor, now; do you really see a



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gum machine? Tell me — do you?"

Sally nodded. Her face was pinched, frightened.

"Okay — I see a cigarette machine. But let that part go for now. We both agree that it's a machine, at least?"

The girl nodded again.

Lowry said: "Then watch me."

He started toward the machine. There was a gasp from the girl — Sally. He felt the skin crawling on his back. He kept on walking.

He was facing the girl, approaching her.

Lowry counted his money. Five dollars and twenty-eight cents — this time the bite was fifty-five cents. He looked at Sally, raised an eyebrow.

"You dropped some coins in the machine."

He tried to remember being close to the machine, but it was no use.

"How did I act?"

"Normal. Except for not getting anything for your money, and not waiting to see what happened."

"What happened?"

"Nothing." She came closer to him, stood beside him, her arm touching his. "I don't understand." She shivered, her arm trembling against his.

"I could make a guess —"

The look in her eyes told him to go on.

"Well, suppose . . ." He hesitated. When it came right down to wrapping it up in words, it was pretty far-fetched.

"Yes?"

Then the words came in a rush. "You don't drop in more than a little at any one time. Two or three coins. A small percentage of what you're carrying, say ten per cent, or less, even. Not so much that you'd ordinarily notice the dent in your cash —"

"But that happens to me all the time." She was clutching his arm tightly now. "I'm sure I have a dime, or a nickel, but when I look in my purse it isn't there."

"Of course!" He remembered all the times in the past days when he had less change than he *had* to have unless he'd been short-changed, or had dropped coins he'd never heard fall. "It happens to everyone." He remembered people staring at coins in their hands, looking for coins they knew must be there, digging again into pocket or purse, coming up without them.

"Okay," he said. "Suppose there are dozens — hundreds — thousands of these machines. Spotted where not more than a few persons would be likely to see them at any one time. Out of the way places, but busy enough — like this one. Waiting for one person at a time."

Her laugh was shaky, forced. "Certainly a gum machine couldn't —"

He flicked a glance at the one



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standing serenely in the alcove.

She didn't finish the sentence.

"Suppose," he went on, "there is something in the machine. A mechanism. Maybe something like a radio transmitter working with a battery. Controlling people's minds when they come near enough. Making them put a few coins in the slot, not many; then making them go away and forget it completely. Tithing them!"

"But surely — Who would do that?"

Lowry shrugged. "Who wants money?"

He tried to imagine people behind the machines, behind the thousands of machines. He saw men going about with canvas bags collecting the take, filling them; counting rooms with big hoppers into which the coins were fed; machinery sorting and adding and totalling. And the machines spreading — the city, the country, the world!

He realized that she was talking.

"I said: 'We don't *have* to do anything about this, of course.' But — but I think we should do *something*."

"What?"

"We could tell someone. Report it. The police . . ."

"Sure." He grimaced. "They'd have you in Observation after the first hundred words!"

"But someone ought to —"

"How would you like to try convincing someone? It might be interesting."

"I see what you mean." She shivered again, and her fingers dug into his arm. "I can't really believe this when I'm here. When I know."

"You know?"

"That you weren't kidding me."

He found her hand, took it in his. "I wonder —"

"Yes?"

"I wonder how many people the machine can control at once. Suppose we both go over. Could it make both of us drop money in the slot? We'll count our coins, then see how much we have left after we've blanked out and come to again. . . . See if its control is strong enough to make us both forget."

She looked up to him, eyes luminous. "Fred —"

"Yes . . . Sally?"

"I'm frightened."

"What is there to be afraid of? It's only a machine. Let's see if it can take money from both of us. . . ."

She nodded, squeezed his hand. He liked what he saw in her eyes.

Together, hand in hand, they walked over to the machine, the quiet, waiting, unobtrusive machine there in the shadowed alcove.

They stopped in front of it.

They were still standing there when the collectors came.



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# 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY
## Reviewed by LAWRENCE JANIFER

2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY is crowded, like most films, with special effects, clicks and swoops and a couple of kitchen sinks. Unlike any other you've ever seen (excepting only THINGS TO COME of respected memory), 2001 makes it effects mean something, puts them into a plot that makes several different levels of sense, gives two good actors a chance to work—and, at that, comes up with bigger and better special effects than ever before. Mr. Stanley Kubrick (producer, director, half the script team) and the learned Mr. Arthur C. Clarke have gone whole hog, and you are going to come out of 2001 in a stunned condition.

You are also going to come out arguing. Just what the ending means—whether, in spite of the mechanical hell which Kubrick and Clarke posit for our immediate future, there is any hope for the human race—is the cause of much jumping up and down and screaming as I write this; there will be more. I haven't heard two interpretations the same, and published statements by Mr. Kubrick are interestingly vague.

There are flaws, yes: the scenes are overlong, the focus of the theme is too narrow. But filming has some new heroes now: Kubrick & Clarke, Gary Lockwood and Keir Dullea (and, briefly, two other actors, William Sylvester and Leonard Rossiter), and very especially R. W. Wilson and his sound engineers, and whoever put together the marvelous black-humor collage of a score. If 2001 does not take sound and score awards next time the Academy meets—well, then there isn't any hope for the human race after all.

PLANET OF THE APES is around, too. Pierre Boulle's novel is second-rate sf; the film (Rod Serling and Michael Wilson mashed the script together, and Franklin Schaffner got stuck with an ungrateful directing job) is very rank indeed. You might note in its favor that Charlton Heston really acts in this one—first time in living memory—and that Roddy McDowall and Kim Hunter manage, somehow, to give their roles a little personality, under the horrid script and the most complex ape makeup in history.

Science-fiction is suddenly big film business, and is saying Hello to millions of people who do not, worse luck, really know our field. Let's hope these people see 2001—and that they avoid PLANET OF THE APES. Serling, as his TV work has shown, is just about up to the sf of 1930. But Kubrick & Clarke are the best of 1968, in 2001.



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# THE RHYME OF THE SF ANCIENT AUTHOR

# OR

# CONVENTIONS AND RECOLLECTIONS

## J. R. PIERCE

*J. R. Pierce who has written under the pen-name of J. J. Coupling has published relatively little science-fiction but virtually all of his output has been small masterpieces . . . things like PERIOD PIECE or INVARIANT which have been anthologized endlessly and seem as relevant today as they did when they were published years ago. He returns after far too long an absence with this delightful analysis of the science-fiction craft as seen from the inside. Do I detect a shade of* mea culpa *here? We shall welcome Mr. Pierce's next story; meanwhile any appearance by this gentleman is, as they say, an event.*

See them cavort in little herds,
Stamping feet and twinkling words,
Cropping imagination's plane,
Far from envy, far from gain.
Oh vision rare, beyond compare,
Fair writers stripping fair souls bare—
And how I wish that I was there.

How he sees them
in their purity

Some write straight technology,
And others write philosophy,
Stale subjects, charming only here,
Or after cans and cans of beer.
Oh cans of beer, apartments drear
And points unclear of friends most dear,
How, how I wish you all were here.

Some peculiar habits
and how he loves them

Fettered by convention's gyves
With editors if not with wives,
Seduced away by slicks and sex,
How can SF survive its checks?

Some stray
but many return



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Oh, riches pall, commitments gall;
What fat cats want cannot be all,
And back into their ways they fall.

Writing tripe for gold's a sin,
But venial, a heart-whole giving in;
A whoring after foreign gods
Makes SF writers boring clods.
Oh lovers pure, I can't endure
The tawdry mainstream's tinsel lure;
The bait is bright, the wages sure.
His horror at those
who lust after the mainstream.


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# FANTASY BOOKS

FRITZ LEIBER

PICNIC ON PARADISE, by Joanna Russ, Ace, 60 cents.

This is the only science-fiction novel I've read at a single sitting in ten years. (I never can resist reading Heinlein first in serials.) The tough little heorine Alyx, a thievish waif from Tyre, grabbed my interest in the first sentence and never let go, any more than she lets go of her job herding an exasperating bunch of future toruists across a winter-resort planet which is the battlefield of an eerie war and glitters with peril. Joanna Russ's first novel has that essential of the best adventure stories: every sentence gets on with the action. The loves and hates, the courage and cowardice, the revelations of character that occur are all parts of the rushing, tumbling, but well-paced journey. (Remember this when we get to *Mulata*.) Here is adventure, not romanticized, but as it really is: rough, dangerous, and dirty, though with moments of tingling awareness, high humor, and surprising beauty.

I guess the winter journey has always fascinated me. And competitive encounters between past humans shaped only by the survival urge and future humans marvellously tailored to fit a variety of artificial worlds. And also heroines who murder and make love with equal conviction.

SPACE CHANTEY, by R. A. Lafferty, & PITY ABOUT EARTH, by Ernest Hill, Ace, 60 cents.

At the world SF convention in '67, John Brunner and I were a two-man panel on the uses of myth in science fiction. We recalled that the early British SF giant Olaf Stapledon had described his *Last and First Men* as "an essay in myth creation." We noted how the current computerized generation has sought new myths to remind them of their basic humanity and allow them to face the chance of atomic destruction and the seeming omnipotence of the machine—especially the wandering hippies, devotees of the guitar more than the book, and such SF-and-fantasy-prone ballad makers as Bob Dylan. We discussed Delany's *The Einstein Intersections* with its use of myths old (Theseus and the Minataur) and new (Billy the Kid and Jean Harlow).

Now this trend is clearly getting stronger, as witness *Space Chantey*, in which Raphael Lafferty transmutes the oldest of fantasy fictions, *The Odyssey*, into a saga of incredibly salty and indestructable spacemen, with charmingly cockeyed more-or-less Greek hexameters accompanying the test:

—"And perils pinnacled and parts impossible

—And every word of it the sworn-on Gospel."

Norse and Celtic legends are free-



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ly used to enrich the Olympian cosmos.

But lest anyone be getting the notion that this book is effetely literary, let me bellow (as its hero Roadstrum would) that it is an adventure of the violentest, crudest, and funniest, an orgy of bashing, banquetting, and buffoonery—though hardly of sex, despite the presence of one Margaret the houri and the aventure of Aeaea-Circe; sex is too delicate an operation for Road-Storm and his rollicking crew, who instead encounter (by the back door) islands that are vast spiders, worlds of cloud-piercing wooden skyscrapers, giant trolls who enjoy spear-wars fought astride flying saucers of rock operated by psi-power, and greedy black suns so massive they gobble their own light.

Our boys, a real Valhalla outfit, get destroyed in every episode (often along with the planets in their vicinity) and are revived only by some gargantuan feast or torment.

Lafferty's method is exaggeration to make Baron Munchhausen gasp, regularly yanked down by confession of bumbling human weakness of the Laurel and Hardy variety, the whole being told in a language of braggadocio midway between New Yorkese, sub species Lower East Side, and a production of *King Lear* put on by drunken gold miners of the Bret Harte breed.

(No space for *Pity About Earth* this issue. Pity. Maybe next.)

MULATA, by Miguel Angel Asturias, Dell, 95 cents.

Folkish tales with supernatural touches about innocent, earthy, sometimes murderous Latin American peasants and their sly, simpleton priests, have often been told by writers as diverse as the mysterious B. Traven *(The Treasure of Sierra Madre,* but also a contributor to *Fantastic),* John Steinbeck, Avram Davidson, Henry Kuttner, and Ray Bradbury. In *Mulata* (literally, female mixed-breed), the Guatemalan 1967 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature takes off in similar fashion (Celestino Yumi flickeringly exposes his in church and also gives his wife to the corn devil, to obtain vast wealth), but then enriches his tale with exaggeration, violence, and word-play rather like Lafferty's, but also with poisonously exotic colors, a rough and wild eroticism (coconuts ornamented with female genitalia and filled with holy water), a detailed tour of Central American Indian mythology, and a psychedelic variations-on-a-theme style (every giant must turn into a dwarf, and every vice versa) that goes beyond Lafferty.

The effect on me was mixed. I greatly enjoyed several sections, but was wearied by the repetitions, the long departures from story line on peyote-seeming side-trips, and the constant cosmos-destroying violence in which the individual is lost in the earthquake vision. Please, can't we have fewer apocalypses? Even in the First Century A. D. they were a mind-blasting form.

Far from being a masterpiece, I find this book one more of the willful, largely reader-ignoring, ex-



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perimental ventures of our times—*something akin to much of the* writings of William S. Burroughs, Jim Ballard, Jack Kerouac, *Catch 22, Finnegan's Wake, Giles Goatboy,* Ezra Pound's *Cantos,* various beatnik howlings besides *Howl,* the film *2001 A Space Odyssey,* and so on, at best compendiums of creativity rather than coherent stories or dramas. Maybe I'm wrong on some of these. Maybe I'm yielding to the current temptation to see fakery, obscurantism, and camp in the greatest art, like Richard Schickel *still* wondering whether Ingmar Bergman is a mountebank and quack or, as he obviously is, the world's greatest creator of films, at least two lengths ahead of Fellini (in Schikel's review of *The Hour of the Wolf, Life* April 26, '68). But I belive I'm mostly right.

Because these years are for art the great age of new materials and techniques. Surely there's a relationship between *Space Chantey* and *Mulata* and the thunder of electronic music and amplified rock. Every other week a new technological advance provides some painter with the opportunity to play with light and pigments and metals in a new and more dazzling fashion and so achieve the masterpiece of the month. The two combine in the light show. Cryptic private images are plastered all over the place, in surreal and more than surreal fashion, so that there is an inevitability about the *Arts* review of *Mulata* saying of Asturias: "Imagine Hieronymous Bosch as a novelist . . ." Montage is the order of the day. Computers rip out patterned colors, sounds, and words. A wild wealth of psychiatric case-history material has been spilled out for the writer. Anthropology tilts its big cornucopia; every week we hear about the inner space of a new minority. Linguistics sprints. Ancient mystical techniques for opening the subconscious are revived, and new ones discovered. There are experiments being made in writing under the influence of LSD, speed, smack, and whatever mind-tickling chemical is synthesized tomorrow. (Marijuana plays several roles in *Mulata,* though I doubt the book was drug-inspired.) Simple information accumulates by geometric ratio.

*Technology is obviously as far ahead of art as it is of morality.*

There simply has not been time to find deep order in the bright chaos. (Bergman hasn't made a color film.)

In some cases, technologic advance is employed chiefly to step up the violence and multi-senses impact of narrative, as in the anti-hero crime and black western movies of the past few years:—*Point Blank, Bonnie and Clyde,* the *Dollars* films, and so on. These last get a nice comeuppance in the new Oscar-winning Czech film *Closely Watched Trains,* where the blast of thudding bullets becomes the tap of a jester's bladder, and the "realistic" sexuality of strong men and women is replaced by an inarticulate, gauche boy grappling with the problem of premature ejaculation.

Which ends us up some distance from fantasy. But I intend this section to be open-ended.



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Continued from page 4
picious start with Stanley G. Weinbaum's *The Dawn of Flame*, the fiction took a sudden nosedive, and for the next several years published mainly space opera of the most adventurous form. The authors were the best working in that area, but it was not adult reading.

Then, just after the War, a new editor appeared on the scene, Sam Merwin, Jr. It took him a couple of years to find his way out of the formula rut that his magazines had been caught in, and to learn the field of science fiction as something a little special, apart from the general run of pulp adventure. But when he did, things began to happen: the fiction started growing up. He began attracting the best writers: Heinlein, the more adult Leinster, the Lewis Padgett-style Kuttner. It was Sam Merwin who really deserves the credit for introducing Arthur C. Clarke to science fiction, even though his first story had originally appeared in *Astounding*. Clarke's *Against the Fall of Night* was the featured novel in the November 1948 issue. September presented Fredric Brown's *What Mad Universe*, a classic in its own right.

About a year later, Merwin decided that perhaps it was time for the covers to grow up. Previously, the pulp covers had almost without exception (the Campbell *Astoundings* apart) featured pretty half-dressed girls in the throes of attack by horrible monsters of one sort or another. The word BEM has now entered the language as a hangover from this period.

Of course, the girls in the stories bore absolutely no relation to the girls on the cover. Merwin, and a few bold-thinking counterparts in other publishing houses, thought that since the readers were buying science fiction, perhaps by some outside chance covers with science fiction subjects would.

If you're past thirty, you may remember the striking view of Jupiter that appeared on *Startling Stories* in 1950 or 1951. The work of Earle K. Bergey, the most famous of the BEMster artists, it sounded the immediate death knell of the BEM and the girl and the hero as cover subjects. Science fiction was growing up some more.

Of course, the day of the pulps was rapidly drawing to a close. Some say television helped kill them, but whatever the reason, in the space of a few years, suddenly there were no more of the bulky books. Perhaps it was the general explosion of magazines of all types, but newstands no longer had the space to display the magazines so beloved of our youth, as awkward and difficult as they were to smuggle into school—too big to fit into pocket or behind any but the largest schoolbook.

But there was a new format on the scene, the digest, named after the format of the fabulously successful *Reader's Digest*. The first science fiction book in the new format was *Astounding*, in 1943, as always way ahead of the rest of the field. But now the rest of the field was catching up.

And suddenly there were so many magazines on the stands that it became impossible to keep up with



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them. No longer could a reader write into his favorite book and complain of a dearth of material. Science fiction had become a bandwagon, and it was a bandwagon rapidly becoming overloaded with untalented players.

The bubble burst. It had to burst, sooner or later. For a while, both the fans and writers were in seventh heaven—the writers because they could pull out virtually every story that had ever been rejected and find a sale someplace.

But the readers soon wised up. As the number of magazines increased, the quality of the material decreased. The good writers were still turning out good stories, and they were still appearing in the magazines that had been the mainstay of the field for many years. But the johnnies-come-lately were finding it harder and harder to keep up with decent material, and they began folding away.

Unhappily there was an over reaction, so that with the bad went some that had been good. The days of the pulps were gone forever, and the pulps that had not made the change into the new format went with them. No more *Startling Stories*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Planet Stories*. *Weird Tales* tried the new format, but in the over reaction, fantasy became a completely dead issue. *Beyond Fantasy Fiction* folded after ten issues, and the fantasy magazines that survived did so only by concentrating on the science fiction in their contents, playing down the fantasy.

Now the pendulum seems to be swinging back the other way, and we're happy to recognize the presence of a new fantasy book, the first one for too long a time. *Worlds of Fantasy* is its name, and if you haven't seen it, look for it.

There is once more a healthy growth in the field. The problem is to see that the growth doesn't repeat the cancerous mistake of a dozen years ago, and run away with itself. We welcome competition, of the sort that will keep us on our toes.

Science fiction book publishing is growing, too, and so far the growth appears to be healthy. I hope it stays that way. For when it comes down to the basics of our existence, we're in business for one reason only, to sell the promise of the future to our readers. As such, we are indeed Immortality Merchants.

"A. L. Caramine" is a pseudonym of a well-known science fiction writer.

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Continued from page 39

here, punch me in the face, and break the Ball, right after an argument with your wife. That's why I tried to stop you from getting married in the first place."

"So that's why you did it! That's why you were so anxious about it!"

"Yes," Kessel said wistfully, "that's why. Well, give my regards to your wife. And to the triplets, of course."

"The what?"

"The triplets," Mr. Kessel said.

"Triplets? What the hell are you talking about? We only got one kid. Mr. Kessel! Mr. Kessel!"

But Mr. Kessel had hung up.

The End



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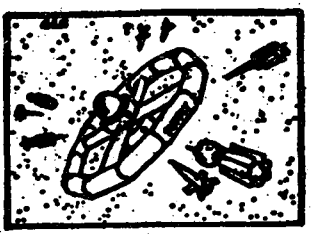

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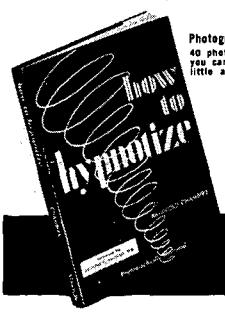


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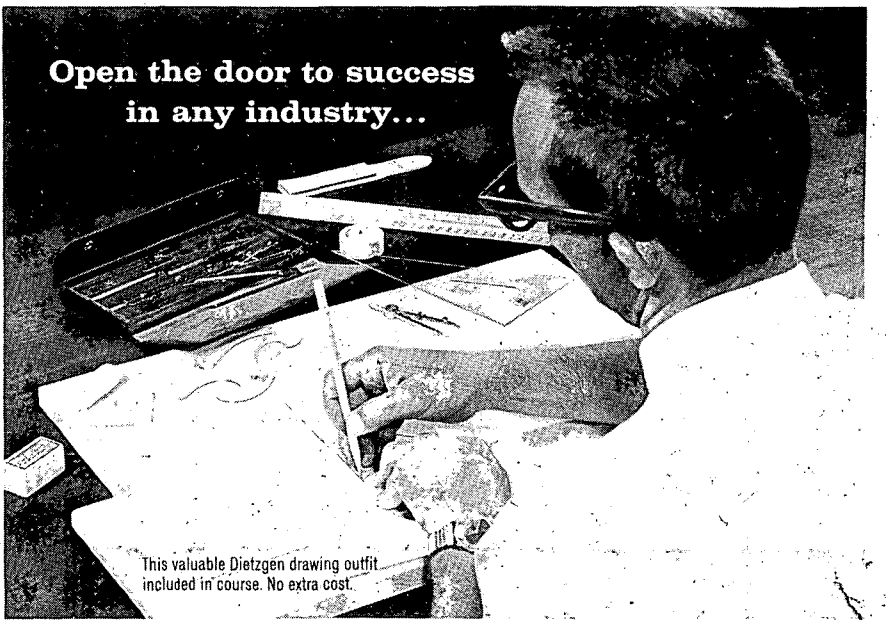


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